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WILLIAM SANSOM: FIREMAN FLOWER

To
PAULINE VILDA

FIREMAN FLOWER

and other stories

WILLIAM SANSOM

“Then the dun topsail of a hooker swept
above the edge of the sandhill and revealed
the presence of the sea.”

Synge.

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NOTE

Since one of these stories, "Fireman Flower," might be thought to implicate a body of men at present on active service, I feel it may be necessary to qualify an aspect of this story that might inconceivably be misunderstood.

The tale is allegorical. Whereas the fire settings are recorded as they really occur, without exaggeration, certain other realities had to be expanded: in fact, the rather odd behaviour of the firemen themselves is absolutely fictitious.

Several of the other stories in this volume have been published before: "The Witnesses" and "Through the Quinquina Glass" in *Penguin New Writing*, "The Inspector" and "In the Maze" in *New Writing and Daylight*, "The Long Sheet" in *Horizon*, and "Pansovic and the Spiders" in *Transformation*. My acknowledgments to the editors of these various publications.

And my deep gratitude to Miss E. Shepherd-Jones for her valuable criticism and her very great help with the manuscript.

WILLIAM SANSOM.

THROUGH THE QUINQUINA GLASS

ALTHOUGH we shared the same table, Jean sat in the shade whereas I was able to enjoy the sunlight. Between us the crenellated shadow of the café awning drew a sharp division across the table. Cigarette tips burned like white gold in the light and in the shade siphons made from blue glass glinted evilly.

Over on the quai a sailor in a striped sweater trundelled a barrel of oil through the hot sunlight. Three curiously tall boys played a game of bowls with some small wooden balls. In the very middle of the road a lean honey-coloured dog with degenerate pale blue eyes stretched itself lazily for the flies. An old woman sat knitting beneath a dusty plane tree. This was the only life on an empty stage. From the campanile back in the town came the slow tolling of a funeral bell. It was three o'clock, the hour for siesta, and no time for men to be abroad. And yet . . . here was a man in a severe black coat just arrived and taking his place in the long row of empty café tables. The man was a stranger to us. We watched him lazily. He looked like an office worker from the town, an advocate perhaps.

Jean was saying, "Damn that waiter! Why must he bring me quinquina instead of pastis? Why must he be insolent into the bargain?"

"Because he's a man," I said. "Because he has a private life beneath his dicky. Because his wife may be delivering and he just can't stand being a waiter this afternoon. How can you know the facts?"

Jean mumbled, "Nevertheless he's a waiter—and on duty."

"But I can't agree. You are influenced in advance by the dicky. You deny the man. If you had seen the man first, you would deny the waiter. We see a man cleaning a car—and we say to ourselves 'There is a man cleaning a car.' But perhaps that man is really wondering whether he should propose marriage to his girl. That, of course, is of more moment than cleaning a car. So what we are seeing is in truth a man wondering about a proposal—not a man cleaning a car. We should be more humble in our judgments: we should say, at the most, 'There is a man.'"

I raised my glass and drank the quinquina. Then, holding the glass to the light, I looked through it. In that café, they serve quinquina in green glasses. Framed in the green glass I found the stranger who had recently arrived.

"Take our new arrival," I said. "There he sits, a man. By some accident of taste, he chooses to wear a black coat. Let us reconstruct his story. He is not only a man in a black coat. His name, let us say, is . . . Aristide Fougères. He is forty years old, he is an advocate in this small Corsican town, he discovered six months ago that his wife had deceived him. Let us see what might be the story of Aristide."

Through the quinquina glass the scene was sunless. The life had left it. It had taken the quality of a picture in oils when the pigments have faded with age. Or it seemed that a mysterious storm had drifted from nowhere, that sudden clouds shrouded our world with gloom. I lowered the glass. I was just beginning to speak when I realized that something was wrong. Something unearthly had happened. I had lowered the glass—yet the scene retained its lurid quality. There was no sun—yet the green gloom persisted. The air was leaden. I could not believe it. I knew there was no real storm. The fact was simply that the quinquina glass had left its imprint on the world. I refused to admit this. I imagined it to be a momentary hallucination. So that I went on talking—consciously avoiding my fearful impression.

"Well, this M. Fougères discovered that his wife had spent the night with a commercial traveller from Auxerre. Let us return through six months to that occasion. The circumstances of the discovery are unimportant. Perhaps it was a letter, a word from an unkind neighbour, or a sock found at the bottom of his bed. However it went, the evidence was confirmed. What is more important is the action taken by M. Fougères on his discovery. For he neither sought the man out, nor accused his wife. M. Fougères remained silent upon the matter. He contained his misery within himself, never breathing a word to a living soul.

"The shock of the discovery affected M. Fougères in two ways. First his vanity was wounded. Secondly, he found himself in possession of a secret which he soon discovered he was using as a weapon. Mme. Fougères was a woman whose forceful character dominated husband and household. Now M. Fougères found that he held a trump card with which he

could annihilate his wife's ascendancy at any moment of his choosing. On the production of such an accusation her composure would crumble, a sense of guilt would sweep the certainty from her eyes, her voice would tremble with a refreshing note of appeal. Thus he felt a sudden secret sensation of power. Yet this was not the only effect the discovery had on M. Fougères."

(This story was coming to my lips with a peculiar fluency. Ordinarily I would have hesitated. I would have paused before the choice of alternatives to the story. Now, it was as if I repeated a story already known to me. I would not say that I felt actually *impelled* to speak. But I was curiously *sure* of my words. The dull light of the quinquina glass alone illumined the scene. The air was breathless.)

"They lived in a narrow house just off the market square. M. Fougères occupied the ground floor with his offices, while the two upper floors served as dwelling quarters. M. Fougères had managed to maintain the privacy of his own personal office. This was his holy of holies upon the door of which even Mme. must knock and wait his leisured 'Entrez.' In this room stood the big desk. It was a heavy mahogany piece with a sturdy roll-top that could drop a reassuring curtain over his private affairs. One day, two weeks after the discovery, M. Fougères cleared out one half of this desk. All the old papers he crammed away into a strong-box—and there lay eight empty pigeon-holes and three clean drawers! This clearance was to be part of a new system. Its purpose was to house evidence of the guilt of Mme. and the collection of evidence relating to any future misdemeanour. For M. Fougères had decided to employ a detective.

"M. Fougères wanted more information for a variety of reasons. I have said that his vanity had suffered. In addition to this, the memory of his courting days had been sullied. He had not treasured his wife's body for some years now. She was still a handsome woman, but the perfection he himself had once known was fading. Yet he still treasured the memory of her young loveliness. And for this he felt a fierce jealousy. This memory lived somewhere within the frame of his wife in her present form. That another man should know intimately even the ghost of his young love brought a thrill of horror to the stomach. At night in bed, in the privacy of darkness, with his wife asleep and unseeing

beside him, he would torment himself with deliberate images of the commercial traveller's caresses. The torture was voluntary, and it was he who exerted every imaginative effort to devise new and ingenious refinements. His first, and understandable, sense of injury changed to a deliberate masochistic delight. And that was why M. Fougères had commissioned a detective. He told himself that he must be sure that her infidelity had been no more than a passing 'one night' affaire. He deprecated that this was 'wishful thinking': yet excused himself on these same grounds. Actually, it was 'wishful thinking'—of another sort. Perversely, he really wished to discover a new infidelity. He did not yet admit this to himself. But soon he realized that he was *disappointed* when the detective brought him no news of an incriminating nature.

"As the weeks went by, he developed new and exciting methods of detection. First, he took great trouble to obtain a duplicate key to his wife's bureau. There he found and read her private letters. From these he gleaned nothing—except for one short note from the commercial traveller himself. This referred to the first and so far the sole visit. M. Fougères removed this letter to his own desk. He read it many times. It rested in the pigeon-hole devoted to the personal details of the commercial traveller himself, alongside a photograph of that gentleman. With these trophies M. Fougères would amuse himself for hours on end. He would choose an hour when there could be no fear of disturbance. Nevertheless he would lock the door behind him with precise care. As he walked from the door to the desk, he would experience a delightful sense of anticipation. He was like a child who stores up a secret moment for the inspection of some very special treasure—a bird's nest, a hidden cupboard in a doll's house, the hour when the candle is snuffed and the nursery fire flickers strangely on the ceiling, the hour reserved for delicious speculation on fine times to come.

"M. Fougères would unroll his desk and spend some time selecting his first subject. Then he would sit for perhaps two hours, sometimes reading a detective's report, sometimes studying the photograph, sometimes the letter. He would invent new inter-connections, new possibilities. At times his temples would throb with the hot blood of indignation, at times he would sink into an apathy of self-pity. There were

occasions when he granted himself the luxury of striding the length of his office—right on the point of a stern decision to go and ‘have it out’ with the commercial traveller. Again, he would engineer periods of ‘clear thinking,’ when his was the generous, logical mind that could honestly admit a sympathy with the commercial traveller; after all, they were surely men of similar taste? And then he would dream of the day when he would reveal his knowledge to his wife. But most of all he would sit and wonder at the absolute irrevocability of what had been done. Nothing could undo this terrible wrong. And the tears would well in his eyes, as he exaggerated the importance of the injury done to him. Each one of these different sensations was a lasting pleasure. And to refine his torment still further, M. Fougères would constantly accuse himself for his whole attitude over the matter. Normally he was a balanced man. Up to this point he realized that he, too, was committing an underhand action. Two wrongs do not make a right. In deceiving the deceiver, he was acting in a mean and ungenerous manner. M. Fougères accused himself.

“Added to these pleasures was a more elementary thrill. It was the thrill of adventure. He took risks, he gambled at ‘not being found out.’ When, for instance, he would quickly run through his wife’s bag while she was in the very next room, while he could actually hear the rustle of her skirts! How quickly his fingers worked on such occasions! How alert was his brain!

“But as the weeks passed into months, such little perverted pleasures developed into a dangerous mania. This happened because no new evidence of infidelity presented itself. M. Fougères sensed that the importance of the matter was fading. Perhaps the moment for taking some dramatic advantage of his secret had slipped by. Time dulls the finer edges of resentment. Gradually he could only think of the episode in miniscule—much as though he were regarding some grand object through the wrong end of a telescope. As its importance eluded him, so he redoubled his efforts to discover something new.

“On returning from any period of absence—even an afternoon’s business in some neighbouring town—he would examine immediately and in detail every ash-tray in the house. Perhaps one day he would find a cigar stub, the end

of an unfamiliar brand of cigarette ! He took great care to smell the cushions and the curtains for the aroma of a strange pomade or the stale breath of tobacco. He interrupted for a period his usual custom of shaving in the wash basin : he endured the discomfort of shaving over the bath, some yards from his mirror, because he wished to leave the wash basin plughole free from the trace of his own shaved whiskers. Thus returning from some overnight absence he would make his way immediately to the bathroom, lock the door, and scrape out the film of soap and dirt that clung to the dark sides of the hole. He would spread this film over a shaving paper and inspect it thoroughly. One day he might discover a bristle shaved off by his own razor ! His own razor callously lent by his wife to her visitor of the night !

"The mania developed and M. Fougères endured greater discomforts, went to greater lengths to achieve his object. He would arrange fake visits to fictitious friends in the country. During these periods he would watch for hours outside the house, sitting in the darkness of a workman's café or pressed self-consciously into the shade of a small alley. Then he would have to sleep at an hotel in the town. The money he spent ! And the valuable hours of business wasted ! For sometimes, having previously arranged to be absent for the night, he would interrupt negotiations in a distant town to catch the last bus home so that he might appear unexpectedly. On these occasions, his excitement rose to great heights. For on his entrance, he would imagine that the man might still be secreted somewhere in the house. He delighted to scrutinize his wife's face for a revealing embarrassment. He loved to search every room and every closet, watching her in between operations and at the same time making subtle excuses that he was looking for this thing or that thing. Sometimes he would make some casual reference to a fictitious acquaintance bearing the same name as the commercial traveller. Once, even, he hinted that he had run into the fellow on a fictitious visit to Auxerre. On this occasion his wife's eyes had brightened and she had looked away. So she still remembered ! In addition he would engineer long conversations with his wife on the subject of infidelity.

"Some two months ago M. Fougères tried another tack. In a moment of delirious misery he visited a brothel. He parted the bead curtains of a brothel and accompanied a girl

up the stairs. Every night for a week he continued to visit this place. His pleasure was vicarious. He bathed in the squalor of this medical experience. He delighted in the clinical efficiency of the beds and the bathrooms. He prolonged the money bargain, enjoying its indignity. He always chose the ugliest and oldest woman in the house.

"But these visits were soon to cease. In the first place, they had been a gesture and became tedious on reiteration. In the second place, Fougères became terrified that his wife would by chance find him out—and in her turn remain silent. Thus she would again be in the ascendant. So M. Fougères cast around for some other plan. And he found one. It was the finest plan of all. He hit upon it only last week. It was so ingenious that he shuddered to imagine that perhaps it might never have entered his mind. Perhaps he would have died without thinking of it! It was so simple a plan as to be elusive: it was so far-reaching a plan that it might never have occurred to him. It was this. It was that he should go to Auxerres, meet the commercial traveller, and make of him a bosom friend. In this way he would always have the man near him—a far more satisfactory instrument of torture than a photograph. And, in a certain sense, the situation would make up a deficiency in his wife's guilt. For his wife's liaison of one night might have been but a passionate lapse, duly regretted, which a generous husband might even forgive. But now, in a roundabout way, she would have deceived him with his best friend. Oh, the injustice of it! And, to make matters worse, she might even be tempted to offer herself to this man again.

"Well . . . M. Fougères has just returned from Auxerres. After four days of enquiries at the hotels—and later at the Town Hall—he has discovered that the commercial traveller has died from a tubercular kidney five months before. So that all this time he has been jealous of a dead man! Death can turn the tables completely on life. Dead men tell no tales, dead men feel no pride in the past possession of women. In a sense, his wife is a widow—and in some artificial manner suddenly rendered blameless. M. Fougères has just left the station. He is sitting down to a glass of coffee. Dressed in his fusty black coat, he sits there bereft in a moment of his exclusive interest in life—his secret. Now just what is M. Fougères to do?"

I paused. I did not quite know how to finish the story. Just then the sunlight snapped on. The green of the quinquina glass vanished as queerly as it had arrived. Suddenly the air was fresh.

At that identical moment, the man in the black coat rose from his chair. He stood for a few seconds staring at the ground just in front of his table. Then he raised his hand quickly to his ear. A shot rang out. I saw the black revolver fall from his hand before he himself toppled stupidly over the table, off the table, and down onto the ground.

THE PEACH-HOUSE-POTTING-SHED

THE old gardener was restive.

Perhaps, seeing him standing up there on the hothouse roof, clinging to the flagpole with one rigid arm, motionless, peering, silent, whitened by the moonlight till he looked like a plaster figure-head—perhaps you would never have thought his behaviour exactly “restive.” But the very fact that he was up on the roof at all—and not asleep among his peaches in the hothouse—shows plainly that his old mind was troubled.

Of course, you would have required a telescope to see him in the first place. You would have had to peer through your telescope all the way over the vast formal garden, all the way along the avenues of rhododendron and tamarisk, past little grey stone statues entwined in their lovers' groves, over the sleeping lake, past lilies and pergolas and miniature bridges, until you finally saw the glass peach-house silhouetted against a dark and distant hedge. And even before that, it would have been necessary for you to have climbed to the top of the high brick wall that ran all of five kilometres round the great garden.

What was life like in the peach-house—isolated in that great empty garden? Many have wondered this. Many who have even applied for a permit to visit the peach-house, perhaps even to live in it, or at any rate in a similar peach-house—but many who have failed somehow to fulfil all the

requirements and obey the traditional regulations that necessarily precede such a visit. Thus one can only imagine what the peach-house is like. Perhaps this is not difficult, for there is little reason to suppose that the peach-house is much different from those hothouses with which one is already familiar.

Only it must be remembered that built onto the old gardener's peach-house is a fine cool potting shed.

Let us then imagine this dual erection! Let us snub our noses on the flat glass panes of the hothouse—so that we can almost smell the mellow warmth within: and then let us peer through the door of the potting shed and savour the sweet shade within, the earthen cool that lies over this cob-webbed granary of old, loved implements.

The hothouse is founded on a short wall of red brick. From this wall the glass sides ascend vertically—then slope off to meet at the apex of a triangular roof. Each wood window frame is painted white: but occasionally round iron pillars intervene, and these are washed blue-green, the faded garden blue of old sheds and weathered stable doors. At each end of the hothouse roof there rise the tall white flagpoles, and between them, crowning the length of the rooftop like a dragon's ruff, there rides a scalloped iron decoration. Forgotten dabs of whitewash obscure some of the upper glass panes; the bleached droppings of birds streak others; and these two films, together with the dusty webs of long-dead spiders, veil the clarity of the glass roof, so that the blue of the sky can never be seen from within, and so that looking up through the peach-leaves one feels that the sky itself is perpetually, whitely misted. This is an added quietude, for because of the veil life in the peach-house can never be disturbed by the movements of clouds and the darting shadows of high birds.

The old gardener's bed stood between the twisted trunks of two of the largest peach trees. The floor—his bedroom floor, you might say—was a red brick path moistened coolly with dark mosses. Heavy leaves clustered above his pillow: a ripe yellow peach bloomed where his bedside lamp might have been. And for a bedhead he had the nests of fat iron hot-house pipes. Beneath these he stored his books on the cultivation of peaches. The gardener's books, his thoughts and his solitude were his only companions: now for many years. No one ever entered the great empty garden and no one

therefore visited the peach-house. The old gardener lived quite alone. He lived in the peach-house in the winter, and in the summer he rested in the cool of the adjoining potting shed. Such were his material contacts, winter, summer, winter, summer—the peach-house and the potting shed.

It is hard to say which is the more delightful—the peach-house or the potting shed. Finally, of course, their delight is complementary—for they are a dual erection and depend upon one another in a spirit of contrast serviced to the mood. Only together can they be finally appreciated. Yet separately they still retain many intrinsic charms. That ripe fragrance of the warm peach-house, the luxuriance of growing things: and then the cool reaches of the shaded potting shed, breathing so drily the calm companionship of death.

How cool it is in the potting shed! The hinges creak with dust, the door drags on a few dried bulbs that lie about the floor. Then—long before your eyes, alert with sunlight, can accustom themselves to these softer shadows—the odours rise up around you. The potting shed smells rarely of old earth and dried wood. To stand in the potting shed is like standing beneath a mushroom. The odours are damp, yet the potting shed is remarkably dry. Gradually your eyes descry this dryness. Over by the window, filmed with dust, stands the gardener's table. Flower pots, cakes of earth, bulbs, nails, strands of raffia, a vice and an old basket stand choked with the dust of crumbled earth. A scythe hangs from a huge nail. The ceiling corners seem lost in shadow: but really these shadows are large black cobwebs that lean over into the shed, so thick, so immobile that they have walled out the square corners and reshaped the whole shed. Somewhere deep in these webs lie the shrunk carcasses of old spiders. But in no way are these macabre. They are indeed the satisfied, comfortable remnants of a slow life lived in the spacious corners: in this potting shed even the spiders are benevolent. Here there is an air of contented desolation, of things that have once been used, that could be used again, but never will be.

Up on the moonlit roof the old gardener clung to his flagpole and peered at the moon. The moon hung low over a clump of black elms. Cloudshapes came riding from nowhere into the far circle of light, seeming to hang back from the moon itself, as a distant sailing ship seems to hang

back on its own speed—until the dreadful moment when at last those clouds smoked sluggishly over the white bright kernel of the light. As he watched the movement of the clouds, the gardener shivered. A ragged hunger came eating into his serenity. The black elms grew blacker as the noiseless shadows from so high above crept across the garden. Then moonlight silvered the scene afresh. But still the gardener shivered. The moon appeared to upset him just as much as the clouds had. He glanced down at his feet, at his boots balanced precariously on the iron apex of the roof. The moonlight bathed his boots in its ancient light. The gardener frowned, shook his head a little uncertainly, loosened his collar, poked a finger round his earhole, peered anxiously again at the moon. Possibly he wished to free himself from some disturbing emotion; perhaps with these gestures he wished somehow to let new air into his body, which must have been choked by the presence of so much disquiet. Nevertheless, each ruse was unsuccessful. He peered again at the moon. And then, quite quietly . . . a little tune began to drift from his lips. He could hardly project it through his moustache, between his old gums with their few blackened teeth. But sing he did, whistling a little, in a shrill broken pitch, every moment straining the song out louder, until finally he was whining at the height of his voice—a song from somewhere years away in a forgotten life that someone like him had once lived.

“ Poor Jenny is a-weeping,
a-weeping,
a-weeping . . . ”

It was not as though the gardener lost his reason during these attacks. On the contrary, he knew exactly how the attacks felt, how they contrasted with his real serenity of the peach-house-potting-shed. He knew them so well that they were in no way unreal to him. He recognized that they were impulses as real as the even tenor they disturbed. But, granted that, why did these attacks arise? For what reason did they molest his sanctuary? The gardener used to mumble over his watering-can as he speculated on this problem. He picked at the wax in his ear and he shuffled his boots on the moss, looking down at them anxiously to see if they were still there. But they always were. And as he stared down

at them—it sometimes seemed to him that those boots, perhaps, were the real phenomenon. For they were always there. They were constant. They were his beautiful, ceaseless boots. They stepped forward in search, yet remained the same in themselves. Their leather grew worn, certainly ; but so did his own skin. That was another thing—a simple material process. His dear, constant boots ! They were precisely how he had imagined life would have been in the peach-house-potting-shed.

The gardener had striven hard to obtain his appointment. Many years ago some forgotten twist of youthful events had in a flash cleared his adolescent mind, and he had seen most definitely how his life should be shaped. From that time he had followed impeccably this impulse, shaping accordingly every facet of his conduct, persevering through the most rigorous examinations, complying with every whim of the Estate Office to which he had become apprenticed. This had been difficult, but perhaps not so difficult for the gardener, with his youthful resolution, as for one who might have approached office from more settled environments and more formed years.

Thus, after the long disciplinary apprenticeship, the gardener had been granted his appointment ! Thenceforth he was to live alone with the peaches and the porous earth. Beautifully isolated, his life would be devoted to the cultivation of the peaches in whose warmth he lived. The Estate Office provided him with all the latest literature and information. The old gardener cultivated the fruit actively and then, through his books, he learnt the latest processes and ideas : and at nights, when the moon shone in through the dark leaves, with the fragrance of the sleeping fruit all round him, comforted by those great warm pipes, eased by the presence of the soil—the old gardener lay alone and mused upon his cultivations. It was a life of contemplation and labour in surroundings of beauty and comfort, a life whose clean equilibrium should never have been rocked. And yet . . . the attacks !

The attacks were inexplicable. They were irregular. They varied in occasion and in intensity. The old gardener could find nothing at all consistent in them—except perhaps their symptom. This could best be described as a great uneasiness, a hunger of the spirit.

Of the spirit ? The gardener could not even be quite sure of that : sometimes he felt intuitively that his attacks were really part of a vague animal yearning—with no particular organic signal. For months the gardener might muse contentedly among his fruit, isolated, warm, occupied : then abruptly into this month-long sanctuary would steal the importunate fevers. The old gardener would be off his bed and out on the roof within a few hours !

Moonlit vigils at the flagpole were not his only excursions. There had been a summer's afternoon, for instance, when he had decided to cut sticks in the cool of the potting shed. It was a slow afternoon. A square of hot sunlight shimmered at the doorway, making the shadowed interior seem all the cooler. You could almost see the heat in a bright line of light that cut through the darkness from a crack in the doorway. Through a small cobwebbed window the gardener could see the top leaves of a high beech : they never fluttered. They stood silver green against a dark blue sky and they never moved, not by the whisper of a breath of wind. There was nothing outside but the dull, intolerable heat. The gardener passed his hand thankfully over the cool grey wood of a sickle handle.

But even as his hand began to enjoy the cool wood, a feeling of doubt tapped the back of his head. Instantly, he looked round the shed to reassure himself. The earth, the coolness, the mossed bricks on the floor. As in the urgent moment just before a calamity, his mind surveyed in a long second the compact months of certainty and contemplation behind him. Yes, all had been well ! All should now be well ! But doubt began to spread its terrible umbrella over his uncertain brain. Then, with the doubt, came desire. He desired more than his own will to leave the shadow and walk out in the sunlight. Not for the sunlight's sake : but just because he felt he must stand outside, at a certain place outside, just between the window and the door, so that his back almost touched the outside wall. If he did that, he felt that something would happen.

The gardener wrestled with this uncertainty for several hours : then, with a shiver of defeat, he walked slowly out into the sun. He stood exactly where he had imagined he would stand. The sun sweated into his old clothes : the heat thumped at his heart. He stood and waited, peering as far

as he could out into the garden, shadowing his eyes and watching for something he could not place. The wax melted in his ears, the hours passed, he lolled sweating onto the wall behind him. Still he waited and watched. Until the gnats came out with the dusk and the black waves of the garden's great trees rose up and drenched the sinking sun. And nothing happened! He shrugged off his uneasiness and shumbled off to the hothouse.

Sometimes he did not recognize the attack until it had already begun. Sometimes he only realized his restive behaviour in the very middle of an attack! One day, when the hothouse was fresh, when he was watering the warm peaches with a cool spray from his wet eel of a garden hose—one day like this, he caught sight of an ant on the moss just by the hothouse door. Without thinking he followed the ant out of the door and along the path to its nest. His eyes followed the ant until it eventually disappeared into its hive of earth crumbs. Then he knelt down and settled himself to watch the little ants. His old head nodded with emotion as he saw the insects darting earnestly from one task to another, pausing to caress a colleague with a flick of the antenna, bustling, elbowing, rearing up suddenly with alert mandibles circling the shocked air. The old gardener watched on and he began to remember things. His mind travelled into the nest, through the sightless labyrinths, until he arrived at the base of the nest: and things he had once known came creeping back . . . that down there in the dark there might be mushroom-rooms, that in their subterranean gardens the ants might have laid down upon a compost of their own preparation the spores of a minute and delicious fungus, that with his blind eyes and his seven senses an old ant-gardener might have been watching over the pinprick globular vegetation he tended deep down in that beloved darkness. Thinking thus, the old gardener woke to find himself envying the ant-gardener! He felt that the ant-gardener was more fortunate than he! Why? Why? The gardener rose wildly to his feet. He shook his head from side to side. He, the cultivator of peaches, had been watching *ants*! He had interrupted his contemplations to spend an hour watching the ants! It was ridiculous! With horror he ran back to the hothouse—to find the hose abandoned on the floor and the precious hothouse flooded.

Now the gardener was restive again. But this time his excitement seemed to have a cause. At least, it had seized him at precisely the same time—coincidentally perhaps?—as a revolutionary occurrence in the garden.

The attack coincided precisely with the arrival of the gentleman in the garden.

One day, with no word from the Estate Office, with absolutely no warning of any kind, the great iron gates at the end of the avenue of beeches had opened, a gentleman had stepped in, and the gates had clanged shut. Afterwards there had been vague movements behind the gate. Possibly officers of the Estate Office were making fast the locks and the chains. Then—nothing but the gentleman! He stood for a second of uncertainty in the path, looking from one side to the other; then he walked quickly through a gap in the rhododendron and disappeared from view.

This had happened as many as twenty-nine days before. The gentleman had never reappeared. The gardener had seen him enter, in broad daylight, with his own eyes. He had not, of course, recognized any particular of the gentleman's appearance: the whole affair had taken place too far away. Only this the gardener knew—that a gentleman had entered the garden and that he must still be somewhere inside it. For egress was impossible. No one could scale the high wall; and, had the gates once been reopened during the night, the gardener would never have slept through such an unusual clanging of the gates. No, there was a gentleman in the garden, undoubtedly. And from the moment of that gentleman's appearance, the gardener's heart had been overcome with a terrible excitement quite disproportionate to the event.

Of course, there had been really no reason to expect notice of any kind from the Estate Office. The Estate Office had never communicated with the gardener since his first appointment. The garden had always remained quite empty. Books had been left outside the gate, certainly, but otherwise—no sign at all from the Estate Office that the gardener's conduct was ever questioned, or even considered.

There are times when one expects something to happen, something unknown, but as real and important as the measure of expectancy that warns the heart. Then—something does happen! But whether it really is the event one expected, or

whether it is some other event which the waiting heart, in its anguish, easily welcomes—that is a matter of which one can never be sure. Something of this nature occurred within the gardener. Although his new excitement raged higher than ever before, nevertheless he felt a certain fulfilment of his hunger. Or perhaps what he felt was a premonition of fulfilment, the certainty of achievement that calms but does not slacken the motors of ambition. Now the gardener spent his days between the flagpole and the windows of the peach-house. The necessity of his culture could not be abandoned: yet, even in the breathless security of the still air that hung among the hothouse leaves, his thoughts flew out of the window towards the garden. Hour upon hour he peered out, each pulsing artery alert for a glimpse of the hidden gentleman. Perhaps the gentleman would suddenly walk out from that copse of pollarded box-trees! Or, barefaced as you like, he might come running round the corner of the thick privet wall that buttressed from the shrubbery at the end of the peach-house path! Perhaps, perhaps even at this very moment he might be standing just behind the privet wall, so that his shoulder just matched the sharp vertical of the wall's corner, with not a hairsbreadth to spare—yet remaining quite unseen! That was a terrible thought! The gardener pursed up his gums to repress his growing emotion as he thought of this terrible possibility. His brain whirling, he began to create such a presence behind the privet wall that before long he was certain that the gentleman stood there—and dropping his watering-can he darted roughly up the path and swung round the corner.

But there was no one there. For a long moment he stood with arms outstretched as the empty reality slowly smothered his hope. Then a tear watered his red underlid, and he walked slowly back to the peach-house.

The next morning an unpredictable affair took place. The gardener received a communication from the Estate Office!

It was a letter, enclosed in a plain white envelope, in no way ostentatious, with no crest, unsealed! It lay, tremendously innocent, right on the top of a pile of new books that must have been delivered during the night.

The gardener was overcome with mixed terrors and hopes. He kept the letter all day without opening it. He placed it

on the whitewashed trestle in the hothouse, and throughout the day he kept watch on it. Then, as evening fell, he opened it. The rending of the paper tore sharply through the hothouse quiet. Then silence again as the gardener read what words were written. High up in the glass dome, among the topmost peach leaves, a large blue-bottle buzzed heavily.

To the Peach Cultivator :

Sir,

The office wishes to inform you that the garden is now occupied by a gentleman.

It is requested that you should in no way hinder this gentleman, nor in fact, show yourself to him. The gentleman has requisitioned absolute solitude. In this respect you will appreciate that any disturbance of this trust will create great difficulties between ourselves and the new tenant. If possible—and we hope that you will make every effort to assure this possibility—the gentleman should remain quite ignorant of your presence. Naturally we were compelled to inform him of your position: but the gentleman considered that he could perhaps tactfully forget this.

With good wishes for the further success of your labours, which we follow with the greatest interest.

Secretary to the Estate Office.

The gardener read and re-read the letter, trying vainly to discover some possible loophole in what was, to him, a sentence rather than a communication. He repeated each word till he could recite the whole script. Anguish gripped his heart. The blood beat against his temples. He fingered his collar wildly: and where one blue-bottle had buzzed, now the silence shook with an infinite buzzing inside his own ears. Striding wildly up and down the brick path, he tore at the wax in his buzzing ears.

Every footstep in the hothouse echoes dully around the panes and up to the roof. There is noise—but the leaves never move. They do not move because they are wholly concerned with their own growth. The leaves, the branches, the peaches are growing fast in the heat. Theirs is a waxen stillness, yet they move. In the breathless air there is the sense of wetness, of water clustered behind each leaf, of the dripping of tropical forests, of rich earth

swelling black round the waterous roots, of climbing saps and the wet, incessant hum of growth But you can see nothing move ! That is the terrible thing !

So in this muffled, urgent atmosphere the gardener wept and shivered as the old hunger came back, striding to and fro, brandishing the letter, bruising the quiet mosses, straining hard at the brink of his reason—until suddenly out of the corner of his eye he saw a figure come flying up the path to the hothouse !

It was the gentleman ! His coat-tails flapped wildly behind him as he came running and gesticulating towards the glass hothouse ! But the wind of his hurry had wound his cloak over his head—his features were hidden ! The frantic windmill of his arms showed an urgent need for help. His arms were stretched out at full length, waving wildly towards the hothouse, appearing from afar to embrace it and pull it towards him in each great circling gesture.

The gardener sobbed his welcome and stumbled for the door. But as he reached for the handle, his arm caught in a crook of one of the peach-tree's branches. Somehow this arm became locked in the grip of the tree. He tugged at the elbow's socket with his free hand. Then that free hand, too, became entangled in a growth of leaves that hung down from over his head. Pinioned by both arms, he arched his chest fiercely forward, now shouting at the top of his voice. His anguish shrieked up to the topmost leaves. His old eyes rolled white above their red lids. His feet kicked madly at the moss. Then the welt of one boot got wedged between two bricks, which seemed to have thrust themselves up from the ground like the shell pincers of a clam

Just as this happened, the gentleman ran up against the door. The cloak was now wound inextricably round his head. He tore at it with his hands, but nothing would undo the cloak. So, sightless and muffled, the gentleman began to fling himself repeatedly at the door, battering himself against it like a huge moth blinded to everything but its mad, preposterous urgency

And the gardener's shouting had turned into words—

“ Poor Jenny is a-weeping
a-weeping,
a-weeping.”

We villagers scaled the wall next morning. I had been at my telescope and seen that something was wrong. We found the two of them—half-dead. The gentleman was lying battered and bleeding on the path outside the door. And, inside, the gardener sagged purple, nearly throttled by the green creature of his own culture.

We released him. And there, in the early dawn, we led him out to where the gentleman lay. It was quite beautiful to see the great tenderness with which they fell into one another's arms. There were no caresses—just a silent, thankful embrace.

Yes, it was only through the agency of others that the need for others was fulfilled in that embrace. Only through the agency of us, the others.

THE FORBIDDEN LIGHTHOUSE

IN this short chronicle of events concerning the Fall Lighthouse and the inhabitants of the small port to landward, my narrative centres upon the struggles of two young people—a youth named Terence and a girl called Moon—to obtain access to the forbidden lighthouse: but my stay in those parts was short, my knowledge of conditions limited, so that perhaps the difficulties and achievements of Terence and Moon were not as unique as they then appeared to me—perhaps they occurred before and perhaps they will recur in the future in multiples of millions. However that may be, at the time of which I write difficulties certainly did exist, the idea of the lighthouse was very much in the minds of the people. I stress—the *idea* of the lighthouse, for the *idea* of the lighthouse had become of more concern than the factual lighthouse itself, to which access in effect could be obtained by anybody, through certain formal channels, at certain expense, and at prescribed intervals.

The Fall Light lies some six nautical miles due south of the littoral. At night not only the lantern but its whole structure

is illuminated brilliantly. Some say that the tower is made of opaque glass, others that a rigid framework ribs a wall of transparent membranous substance: but however that may be, the entire erection is lit throughout its perpendicular, from its wide base all up its round slendering body to the beam projection platform at the summit. Electric incandescent light of more than fifty millions candlepower is refracted from a series of large glass prisms and dioptric lenses. The lantern revolves ceaselessly and flashes into different colours—pink, amber, violet—so that such a distant obelisk of many-coloured light starting from the dark sea far out in the night presents indeed a most beautiful and seductive sight from the land.

The lighthouse is the most outstanding feature of the district, and hence it has always played a role of importance in the minds of the inhabitants of the port. It was their custom to gather together in parties and spend whole evenings on the clifftop in admiration of the seaward light. Once, too, it had been possible to view the lighthouse from the moles of the little port, where seats and a bandstand had then been provided by the Harbourmaster's Office. But that was long ago and by the time of my visit the contemplation of the lighthouse was in disfavour. The harbourmaster under whose benevolent guidance the people lived had for certain reasons—reasons which I will particularize later—contrived everything in his limited power to divert the people's interest from the idea of the lighthouse. For instance, at one time the lighthouse was visible from the moles. One could then see it by looking past the eastern promontory of the cliff jaws that sheltered the harbour. And now this harbourmaster has actually constructed a false nose of concrete on this naze of rock so that the lighthouse is forever obscured from the molesitters. Moreover—and here he reveals a cold cunning beneath his mask of benevolence—the harbourmaster realized the inadequacy of his powers, which embraced neither the use of force nor the promulgation of laws, and by subtle devices fabricated a moral controversy upon the question of the lighthouse, so that the people should themselves prevent each other from indulging in the contemplations. First he instilled into a small proportion of the community a disaffection for the lighthouse. Quarrels soon arose. It was not long before the people were continually at variance upon

the subject. And now it has become generally prudent to remain silent, to conceal one's opinion, for now a mere mention of the lighthouse is enough to court social disfavour and endless trouble.

Nevertheless, despite the harbourmaster's efforts and this almost voluntary social veto, the lighthouse is still very much in the minds of the people, and the great majority still visit the forbidden cliff-top under the cloak of darkness. Occasionally small sections will rebel openly. Thus parties will actually set out in boats towards the lighthouse. But most people are content—or more truly—discontented—to survey their idol from the dark cliff-top.

Why is the idea of the lighthouse of such deep concern to these people? It is indeed a notable feature of the district, but this in itself should never have merited so profoundly embowelled an interest. Perhaps the people have always known deeply that the lighthouse is the direct agent of their survival, since it guides into their port the ships and the trade upon which they live. Without the lighthouse the little community would have weakened and died. So that it is not surprising that beyond the factual lighthouse myths have grown around the idea of the lighthouse. Through the centuries the lighthouse has acquired a legendary reputation and a golden growth of saga. And in addition to this there was, at the time of my visit, a further attraction in the lighthouse—the unspoken impulse to rend the new veil that obscured, even apparently at the people's own will, the object of their veneration. The attraction of the forbidden was added to their fundamental concern.

My ship put in at the port in the very early morning, a morning of sunshine and autumn warmth. The stone moles were washed fresh by the night's dew, and about the little hamlet tucked into the cliff cove there could be felt a stimulating atmosphere of salt water, good stone, boats, tarred tackle, and, against the blue sky and the land grass, a few lines of washing that hung still, so still in that sparkling morning of early sunshine, without ever stirring, for there was no wind at all. People were about, the day had begun, there was painting in the boats, a tarring of lobster pots, a patching of nets. On the main quay a toy crane puffed and steamed, brandishing in the air loose fascies of yellow

pine picked from the hold of a small coaster. Away out on the calm blue an invisible motorboat chugged.

The first man I spoke to was Terence.

He was leaning up against the seawall, blue-sweated, idly scratching at a rusted iron ring set into the stone. The sight of the strange concrete nose to the cliffhead interested me. I went up to Terence and asked him why it had been built. Two vicious jabs at the rusted ring. Without raising his head, he drawled in a dry tone of aggressive disbelief, "Wha-a-a-t?"—like the cynical response to a bad joke.

I repeated my question and he looked up. His small grey eyes flickered. He was resenting me. Was I making a fool of him? Then he noticed my clothes and saw that I was a traveller. "You're foreign?" he asked. There was still a trace of suspicion in his voice. He seemed to expect ridicule. Then, "Well, since you ask—it was built by the harbour-master to prevent us seeing the lighthouse. But you knew that . . ."

I said, "The lighthouse? What lighthouse?"

His lips faltered. He was astonished. Then he began to smile, then to laugh. "Are you a man—or a ghost?" he asked, rubbing his laughing cheek, relaxing in relief. "Are you really a man?" I had made too farcical a remark to be suspected further of ridicule. Now he was at ease. And my ignorance was so unusual, so reassuring, that this Terence wished immediately to pour out upon me some great weight of repressed resentment. His eyes had widened and he clutched my arm. "Come along. We'll get Moon. I'll tell you all about it. I know you'll be interested . . . if you want to know about the lighthouse. *If* you want to know . . . that 'if' is good. But we must get Moon. This breath of air'll do her good . . ." He was hurrying me along the mole towards the cottages. I had no idea what the lighthouse was, what Moon was, and what the great joke was. But soon I was sitting in the dark-varnished parlour of Terence's cottage, drinking a mug of Terence's black brew, and listening to a strange story—of the Fall Lighthouse.

Terence described the lighthouse edifice as it appeared from the land, and outlined the people's secret veneration. He told me how on winter nights, when the blackness shuddered with unseen waves, when the world to sea was storm-tossed and frightening and seemed to threaten the land with

destruction—how the people were cheered by the sight of that distant obelisk of firm light, so assured among the darkly moving torments, so clearly the fundamental that would never desert them and from which they might forever rejuvenate their desiccated trusts. And on nights of calm weather, over the floodtides of spring or the flat swell of summer, how the incandescent obelisk thrust itself so powerfully from the great expanse of water, solitary but never lost, commanding proudly the immense sea, glorying in its independance and its throbbing colour—so that the people sat upon the clifftop till dawn entranced by so much beauty and such fearless domination.

But—and Terence's eyes were pressed small with anger—for several generations, perhaps even for centuries, successive harbourmasters had gradually taught the people to despise the contemplation of the lighthouse's delights. The people now visited the cliff secretly and with guilt in their hearts. Yet perhaps they went more frequently than before. Their attitude had become tainted with false excitements and a natural disposition to view the lighthouse in wrong perspective, to exaggerate certain dimensions and imagine qualities that had never existed. This Terence had deduced from reading into the history of the port, from the days when the people assessed the lighthouse's beauty with joy and detachment—to that fatal time when once a harbourmaster had proclaimed the first curfew on the mole, and thence the history of growing suppression, the pickets, the erection of seaward screens, the building of the concrete cliff, the inland festivals, the public exhortations, the enrolment of a secret espionage corps, the launching of a fleet of observance pinnaces, until the general incitement of inter-family feuds. "Even today," added Terence, "you may still see in the church museum relics of happier times. One of the great ironwork swings provided by a generous harbourmaster for the enjoyment of innocent molesitters, one of the public seats, part of the bandstand, and the tripod of the old rusted telescope that once divested the lighthouse of its distance and unfamiliarity. But now in the church museum these lovable relics are mocked with draperies of mourning black and ridiculed with scornful tablets. So you see how things have changed.

"But you will be wondering," he continued, "why the harbourmasters should ever have taken this attitude? Well,

as I see it, the reasons are contradictory. In the first place, the harbourmasters believed that enjoyment of the light arrested the spiritual growth of those treasured superiorities, the people's minds and souls. In fact, the people should become less animal. But on the other hand, the harbourmasters also accused the people of degeneracy, believing that as animals they were waning, in fact that they must become more animal. Such is the absurd situation. How of course it first arose is of no importance—an occasion of social reaction, some political hankering or other. That can only matter historically. Let us rather look for the rooted cause, the constant impulse beyond the mere occasion—that the people must become less animal, yet more animal!" He paused, and gazed sadly out of the window towards the sea. "You can imagine the result of this. The people have lost their faith in each other. They can't face life openly, or with joy. No, they live beneath a dark cloud of distrust. All day they spy upon one another. There is no lattice without its unseen eye, no curtain without a trembling finger to draw it aside, no door without ears. Little children are thrashed. Yet beneath this façade, each one secretly yearns for what he publicly condemns. There is such a poison in the air that . . ."

The door opened and Moon came in. She was an indefinite girl, well-built, with a long figure and carrotty hair. There was not much about her, except perhaps the flair of love. When she looked at Terence, her eyes seemed to flash and to sleep at the same time; and even apart from him her body seemed to curve into a removed embrace, her head nestled to one side, like a bird listening, and her hips slackened into an attitude of defenceless invitation. Terence introduced me with pride, standing a foot higher than her, his arm around her shoulder. It struck me that here at least were two people unaffected by the prevalent gloom cast by the extraordinary lighthouse.

Sitting round the table, with the black brew in our mugs, Terence began to tell me the story of Moon and him. Sometimes Moon interjected a phrase, but for the most part she just looked at him, nodding, believing in him with unafraid admiration.

"Moon and I," said Terence, "have not lived here long. We came from in-country about a year ago. It was our intention to marry and settle down in this port. At least

that was our intention when we first arrived. But we didn't count with the lighthouse. We had heard of it and had our ideas of its appearance and meaning. But you will understand that in-country they approached the subject of the lighthouse openly: it was discussed without fear, indeed to an extent it was venerated, but in a different way. It was in fact considered to be a feature of the territory, something that existed, an exalted architecture, worthy of admiration and love—but no more than that. We built no legends. We surrounded the idea of the lighthouse with no mysticisms, no hysterias. The lighthouse was to us something that existed and gladdened us. For we also, as you can imagine, depended for our survival on trade imported upon the lighthouse's beam.

"Yet, within a month of arriving here, Moon and I were infected. People listened to our innocent inquiries in shocked silence. Soon we were shunned. The harbourmaster himself called one day and talked to us in a dreadful language of hints and innuendo. We could never walk out without the curtains to each side of the street stealing curiously aside. The shopkeepers served us in silence, their thin lips compressed. Even the little children, hating the unusual, stared after us and threw stones. Yes, poor Moon discovered that even the children were making up games about us!

"Well, we soon recognized the impurity that lay in the air and we were determined that we at least would never be contaminated by it. So that we used regularly to walk up the cliffpath in broad daylight! Anyone might see us. We flaunted our determination . . . but the poison triumphed. You see, in our anxiety to appear unconcerned, we took to the cliffpath more often than we really desired. Our visits became artificial. And there we found ourselves watching the lighthouse evening after evening, when perhaps really we had no wish to, just to impress the people. Finally the lighthouse began to take charge of us. And now, today, we find ourselves in this position—we, who are innocent, are setting too much store by the lighthouse, it fills our thoughts, it obsesses us.

"Sometimes we think of surrender. We think we will capitulate to the people, that life will be simpler that way. One of us weakens. Perhaps it is I—and then Moon speaks to me and strengthens me. Or Moon grows sad, and it is

for me to comfort her and remind her that we are right.

"A week ago, Moon received at her cottage the anonymous echinus, the sea-urchin. You know, here that is a sort of public blackball. Yes, the little prickly dried ball of the echinus was dropped during the night through Moon's letterbox! A disgusting affair. We knew that it meant ruin. It meant that finally the community had decided against us, that we should be boycotted in the shops, that there would be no work for us. Public disfavour of this sort utterly denies one the means of subsistence. While one is not guilty of a recognized crime, while one cannot be punished legitimately, one nevertheless suffers greater punishment than in the prisons or by the flogging. One is outlawed. One must starve to death, or leave."

Terence grasped Moon's hand and winked at her. She had lowered her head at the recollection of the echinus. But at Terence's next words, they both turned to me and smiled, apparently drawing fortitude from each other and from the purpose that was now to be divulged.

Terence said: "So now—we're building a boat!"

Moon's eyes began to live. Her chin thrust itself a shade forward. It was as though Terence had said, "Tomorrow we ascend to the Pole," or "We have decided—the tyrant shall be assassinated." And yet all they had said was, "We're building a boat."

Moon grasped my hand and led me to the door. Terence followed and the three of us were soon walking fast towards the eastern cliff. Nothing would suffice but that I should see their boat without delay. Their impatience was childlike, purposeful but innocent. We hurried over the pebbles of a dried lagoon and then up the flinted cliffpath. Hedges sweetened the salt air with their briar and honeysuckle. Terence in his seaboots and Moon in her gourd clogs had forgotten my soft leather town shoes. So had I. All we thought of was the boat. Then we reached the summit of the path, so that the sea lay ahead, and rising from it the opalescent lighthouse, and beneath us the drop down to a narrow white pebble beach.

Even in their haste to descend to the boat, Moon and Terence paused to survey for a few moments the distant lighthouse. Moon dropped a curtsy and Terence bowed gravely. Their eyes were puzzled as they peered forward,

heads to one side, as though listening, vainly trying to reduce the distance that hazed exact detail. Yet their lips smiled. To be not sure of a thing, and yet to welcome it without fear, with an inborn trust!

It was my first sight of the lighthouse. Earlier in the morning when my ship had sailed towards the port, it had been hidden in a light mist. But now the sun was high, the wide sea blue and sparkling, the tide full and calm. Little shoreward waves rippled far below among the rocks. Up on that bare clifftop, with the wide blue sky above and the flat sea fanning out on all sides to its indistinct horizon, there was a fine feeling of space. A light wind had arisen, sharp with salt. A gull flew, an effortless arc towards the lighthouse. Watching the white simplicity of such a voyage, with almost a feeling of guilt I thought how different the approach of the people would have been. An imagined cloud seemed to obscure the port lying beneath my shoulder: and feeling this, it was sad to see the sun touch the lighthouse with sudden crystal fire. Its peculiar transparent material glinted into life. Out to sea, washed by the fresh winds, there was no mystery about it. And yet near my feet, on that very wind-swept turf, lay the stone foundations of the telescopes that had once turned the clifftop into an observatorium. For centuries in that port great beacons of flotsam had illuminated the youths and maidens who, garlanded with seaweed and shells, had danced for the lighthouse when the calendar showed the first mackerel moon. For centuries at propitious festivals calves from inland had been keelhaunched through the night in a strange dance of boats at the harbour mouth. Superstitions had always surrounded the idea of the lighthouse. Now a worse cloud had gathered about it. And . . . I could hardly believe these things as the sunlight shimmered over its far pellucid tower, the lighthouse, rising so innocently from an endless sea, alone and tranquil in the immense blue arc of that autumn morning.

Their heads had disappeared beneath the edge of the cliff: they were already several flights down the carved steps that zigzagged across the perpendicular face towards the beach. I scrambled after them, trying to attract their attention—but they were lost in their purpose, their descent to the boat, chattering Terence and Moon with her hair flying wildly in the wind. They never looked back.

Among a group of huge conglomerate boulders lay the stocks and the half-constructed boat. "Don't think we're hiding it behind the boulders," Terence said. "We only use them to shelter the wood from the weather. Don't care who sees us—the more the better. It's essential that this thing should be done openly." With great excitement he explained the boat's construction. Moon demonstrated the working of the rudder, which she would direct. And by the little wooden boat, with those two young and eager people, in the shadow of huge primeval stones, one felt that here indeed must be a voyage worth attempting: a man and a woman, pink and vulnerable against the masses of hard lava; yet now armoured with endeavour, peculiarly fearless in their mutual trust, acting together and in the face of all popular oppositions.

I suddenly noticed that one of the boulders had been covered with chalk marks. Somebody had scrawled the words "Terence" and "Moon," and then had interlaced these with obscene devices. I turned away in anger. Terence saw me and laughed. "That's nothing," he said. "You wait and see what we really put up with. The sound of my hammer should attract them. But whatever they do makes no difference. As soon as the boat is finished—we sail. For the lighthouse!"

He determined the last words with three thuds of his mallet. Moon was already setting out nails and tarpot. I took up a saw. Soon we were hard at it, the mallet-blows ringing up the cliff, the saw whistling, Terence and Moon chanting in rhythm with the heave of our shoulders as the fresh wood gunwales rose into shape.

Presently, for no visible reason, I felt some of the magic leave the air. I began to feel ill at ease, as at the presentiment of bad weather, as when a cloud passes quickly over the sun, disarranging the day with the memory of old storms. Had I half remembered something unpleasant? I stopped sawing. The sun still shone. The light glinted on the smiling teeth of the two in front of me. There was no pause in their light song, nor slackening of the swing with which they worked. Yet . . . these things had lost some of their poetry. I could see only two people working; I could no longer sense the spirit of their work. Some other force was pulling at me, weighing with a dreadful foreboding even in the bright sunlight. I

listened, I listened for silence. But above the sounds of work there were still the sounds of nature, the slow lapping of the waves, the cries of the gulls, the chuckling and grinding of washed pebbles. Life continued evenly. Yet my sense of uneasiness grew stronger with every second—until suddenly, with a little shudder, it became localized in my back, as though a finger were pointing into the small of my back, a finger, fingers, eyes . . .

I waited, in sudden terror, then glanced fearfully back over my shoulder.

Five black figures were standing behind us on the white pebbles: five immobile figures outlined funereally like solid shadows against the white cliff.

Such things should never happen in the sunlight. They should be reserved for darkness, for traditional settings where the spirit is prepared to receive terror. But on the beach, in the noon sunlight! Those figures were veiled. . . . Do you know the pig-faced women, dark-veiled, shuffling secretly in the grey afternoon from their lonely houses on the suburban hills?

In downclapsed hands the five veiled watchers gripped furred umbrellas. Their dresses, skirted, were sexless and of matt broadcloth. On their heads rose tophats from whose brims the veils descended, draping down like weed upon black shoulders and collars. They stood absolutely still. And though their eyes remained invisible, the direction of the veils, as the rigid posture of their whole bodies, implied a right to criticize, a terrible intolerance, scorn that was hostile in its conviction of unassailable right. Terence must have noticed that I had stopped sawing, for he looked round. As he saw the figures, his eyes winced briefly, then grew dull. He shrugged his shoulders, motioned me to continue working.

So these watchers were an old phenomenon! Moon had now seen them too. She dropped her nails, and stood for a moment with arms hanging slackly down to her sides, her eyes anguished and appealing, miserable and dejected, as though she had been whipped defenceless, broken. Then she too turned back to her work. She strengthened her bosom with a deep sigh and, narrowing her eyes, pressing together her lips, she began to pick up one by one the fallen nails.

A green glass bottle came tossing through the air from behind one of the boulders. It missed Moon's head by a few inches

and tinkled stupidly among the pebbles. Terence straightened up from the stocks. A face, strawhatted, appeared over the boulders, glanced sharply to see what damage had been done, then assumed a quick expression of apology. "Sorry," it said, without much interest. Then with a vicious twirl to its moustache, "I didn't know you were there." The head put itself on one side and smiled evilly. Terence raised his mallet.

"Listen!" he shouted. "If that happens ever again, if any of you try that one again—you'll get a taste of your own back. And I mean it." He swung the mallet towards the head, which immediately disappeared.

Suddenly a deep and shocked voice from behind us. One of the figures, hissing its monotone: "Ebenezer, Ruth—did you hear? Murder! It's driving them to murder! Bethesda, my dear, and Hephziba—did you hear?" Then together the five voices hissed and chattered, so that the words were caught in a kind of cumulative echo: "Murder, murder, murder . . ."

Terence and Moon paid no more attention. Except that now they bent more fiercely to their task. It was plain that while these external criticisms still had some power to hurt them, nevertheless they were determined to pursue their own intentions. They would have wished for approval from their own people, but denied this, criticism stimulated them. It was strange that, though convinced of their right, they would never be quite free from the opinions of others. Deeply they yearned for acceptance.

That night a full yellow moon varnished the sea. The water swam black and warm. When we reached the clifftop again, after having supped in Terence's cottage, we saw that this dark water glittered with two roads of light, the reflection of the moon and the reflection of the illuminated lighthouse. It was quiet. All the small daylight sounds had been stilled. The moon cast over the countryside a queer immobility. The grass and the rocks slept—or perhaps waited awake, watching. Only the lighthouse moved. Far out to sea it throbbed and flashed with sudden light, revolving its beam, casting and drawing in its great searching rays, thrashing the whole sea with movement. Its membranous texture stood alive with coloured light: and above, from the immense

incandescent engines within the upper lantern there swept in tireless search those endless white rods of its product.

We stood and watched silently. Neither Terence nor Moon spoke. They looked out thoughtfully, without rapturous contemplation. The boat had been finished that afternoon. Tomorrow they would sail.

At length Terence spoke. "Mackerel Moon," he said. "You've chosen a good night. They no longer dance the traditional dances. But the date remains, and the weather's good—you'll be seeing something tonight." He walked to the cliff-edge and peered over. "No one on the steps," he muttered. Then aloud, "Let's go down."

Halfway down the cliff we paused on a natural landing of rock. Ledges ran to right and left of us: further down other such shallow roads broke the absolute perpendicular of the huge cliff. In the golden light and the bluish-black shadows of the harvest moon I saw that large boulders occurred at periods along these ledges: some of these had been carved roughly into the shape of men, or, I suppose, gods—for the sculpture was ancient. And ancient too were other large stones, sacred menhirs, that had been lowered long ago from the clifftops to their position facing the eternal sea. These graven shapes accentuated the silence and the moonlit stillness. We had come upon a dead world of lunatic light and frozen lava, prehistoric and pitiless. Not a ripple disturbed the full black water.

My voice echoed sharply, then faded into the greater silence. "What can we see tonight?" I was saying, "There's no one——" But Terence had put his finger to his lips, and was frowning queerly at me. Then, without speaking, as though at all costs we must not be overheard, he gestured quickly to a patch of grass along the ledge. Moon gave me a little sideways glance; it seemed that we were all three confederates in some secret.

I strained my eyes at the patch of grass, then started in surprise. Where I had imagined no one there lay an elderly woman, half hidden by the tall stems, her face gazing out to sea. She had not heard us. She never moved: just stared out towards the sea and the lighthouse. I turned back to Terence. He had kept his finger to his mouth. Now he nodded and pointed with a wide gesture at the whole system of ledges. I followed the sweep of his arm—and then, amazed, I dis-

cerned first one dark figure and then another until among the shadows of the menhirs and the buttresses of cliff, among the graven boulders and the clumps of rockweed, I counted hundreds of human statues, silent and immobile, taking no care of each other, but intent only on gazing seawards. Among the grey rock masses and the darker weed they stood indistinct, blending dimly with their hard background—soft aliens, like toadstools. Terence whispered, "The people from the Port."

So these people were the people who in their public disgust had obstructed Terence and Moon! These who in the shadows of night, in their secret hearts as secret as the darkness in which they hid in stealth and mutual fear, crept to the cliff and bathed the night long in the delights of a contemplation they disavowed! . . . I tried to see what kind of faces these people had. But the golden light made things indistinct.

A laugh, high and wild, echoed from the beach. Another, and another. A party of laughs, from mouths invisible, like masks of laughter. Then, out of what must have been a cave, there emerged a soft light, growing stronger with the growing sound of laughter. The churning and splashing of paddle-wheels, the thud of an engine, suddenly a bright chord of band music—and right from beneath us sailed into the full light of the moon the shape of a paddle steamer. Its thin, rakish funnel threw crimson cinders into the moonbeam. The water churned golden from high spidery wheels. On deck the shapes of people poured to and fro beneath a string of coloured lights. There were sounds of shrill laughter, of singing, and dancing to the band. The band pulsed brazen and harsh, steam music, a loud throbbing calliope. Once a bell sounded, and there was a brief hushing of the merriment. A single voice announced through a megaphone. The words were indistinct, for already the steamer had churned some way out along the moon's trail. But from his crisp intonation it sounded as though the speaker were a salesman, as though he were stimulating the bidders, or announcing perhaps a final list of prices. The bell sounded again and there was a loud cheering as the steamer suddenly changed course and sailed off the moon's track into the other road of light, the track of the lighthouse. "They never actually reach it," whispered Terence, "although there are so many of them and it is so powerfully organized."

The paddle steamer was the first show of activity. Later, as we kept our vigil, both on the ledge and wandering down to the beach itself, I was surprised by many sights. "But how can this be?" I asked Terence. "I see how the people may stand here hidden and in silence, if beyond themselves they are compelled to do what their conscience tells them is wrong. For whatever reasons—though I may not approve of them—I can nevertheless understand that. But it seems that they break their silence and emerge into the light as well. That is a miraculous complication I cannot grasp."

Moon answered me. "But wouldn't it rather be the miracle," she said in her softer voice, "if so many people *did* all act in the same way?"

"You'll find the majority hidden on the cliff," added Terence. "Those in the paddle steamer, and the others, are really exceptions. The pleasure steamer supplies a mechanical opiate. The others—well, watch them . . ."

And I saw single bathers plunging into the black water, swimming into the course of the lighthouse's reflected light, and then stopping to float on the coloured water, to play with the reflection, perhaps diving and curvetting like porpoises, swimming in figures of eight or in short mad circles, thrashing the water wildly or resting serenely upon their backs with arms outstretched and fingers lax. As from time to time we flashed torches along the beach, I saw other people who had wandered apart from the crowd and who regarded with adoration the shadows of certain menhirs and boulders cast by the moon's light against the cliff. They imagined the shadows to be the lighthouse. Sometimes they grasped at the black intangible shape, scraping their fingers and even battering their crazed heads against the pitiless rock.

I saw others, solitary and in groups, who stood facing inland; suddenly they would wheel round, glance briefly at the lighthouse, then return to their landward vigil, content, it seemed, with this glimpse. Others regarded the lighthouse through portable screens, fretwork and filigree contrivances which allowed them the view of only certain parts of the distant obelisk. It seemed that their voluntary repression was dictated by a need for contrast, for hide and seek.

Sometimes from caves beneath the cliff ornamented barges or sleek electric yachts would glide out onto the lighthouse's reflection. In the barges lay stretched recumbent the

romantics: above them swayed tasseled canopies, beneath their bodies cushions, and their pale hands drifted in the warm black water. In the electric yachts it was the same. Amplifiers droned the music of muted trumpets, and the passengers lay on airfilled rubber mattresses, sipping the suave romance of new liqueurs. All drifted in some way or other towards the lighthouse.

But once a yacht, with its electric horn jammed, either by some failure of the mechanism, or even, Terence suggested, by some transformation into reality of the romance in the captain's heart, sped on further than the others and near, very near to the lighthouse. It was then as if a swarm of swift, rapacious waterbeetles came skidding from the direction of the port. •Terence stiffened with interest. He whistled in his teeth and whispered, "The harbourmaster's pinnaces—hydroplanes . . ."

"But I thought he had no power to use force?"

Terence smiled, "There are more ways than force." The skidding, bouncing, sprayfeathered hydroplanes darted fiercely after the yacht, now a white gleam in the distance. Soon they had sped well beyond it—and began curving across its path. "You see—they're going to ram!" I shouted. But the yacht suddenly altered its course, the hydroplanes slackened their speed. Then all the craft seemed just to drift, while a booming sound, like the echo of a megaphone, tremored faintly to the shore. There seemed to be some sort of parley in progress. "No, the harbourmaster can't use force," said Terence. "He never meant to ram the yacht. He wanted to talk to them. Now he's probably faking some story of a fictitious net that they might damage: or he's telling them the story of others who reached the lighthouse, terrible fables of madness and death, and again quite fictitious: he may be playing them nostalgic music of the land, to lure them back to the port; or he may be threatening them again with ostracization, anything, anything—that is within the invention of his versatile megaphone."

After a while, the nose of the yacht slowly turned and came gliding towards the coast. With a busy display of circling and froth, the hydroplanes followed. Soon they broke off, apparently satisfied, and disappeared round the concrete promontory. I heard Moon sob. Terence hastened to comfort her. But for a long time I heard the soft, liquid

choking. Once she said, as if to herself, "We won't give in like that? Will we? Will we?"

I don't think Moon doubted their strength. She was not afraid, but at the same time she saw clearly the dangers that lay ahead of them: so sometimes she felt that perhaps these people, that harbourmaster with his pinnaces, would prove too clever for them. She and Terence were alone. And the consciousness of their solitude at times unnerved her. How could two solitary spirits succeed against such a vast organization? They were strong, true, and their purpose was clearly defined. They had chosen an honourable path, the plain path of truth, which they had to follow simply, with none of the worries of diplomacy and finely balanced intrigue. Their way was obvious. Yet Moon saw that they were neither of them machines of truth; they were animals with a glimmering of the guidance of truth, vulnerable animals. She wished to place all her reliance on Terence, to follow him implicitly, while at the same time supporting him, encouraging him. But she knew also the woman's fire within her. She was uncertain that at perhaps the most unpropitious moment of all, a sharp, tearing indignation, an hysterical fight in her might blaze up and burst—striking out beyond the reach of Terence's restraining arm, his careful shelter. And then all might be lost.

So that, as later we retraced our steps towards the cottage, Terence quietly repeated to her the logic of their aims, as if reiterating time and again a long learnt lesson, while she, Moon, clung to his arm and agreed with each word, nodding continually, though deep within her the intuition still roamed.

What does courage look like? Not the glittering eye and the upraised face; that is fanatic and the spirit has long soared above the fight. Nor is courage the other bright eye, with its contemptuous mouth, that walks through the ranks of its enemy despising them, an eye that is afraid to comprehend its fears and converts them instead into pride. Nor is it the face that a moment before shrank with terror, eyes white and lips blubbering, yet suddenly, still in the knowledge of its fear, mobilizes itself into a false mask of strength to carry through some strange order of the heart, while still afraid. Nor again is courage that dull thing, the massive jaw that has never known fear beyond the temporary

physical pains and, one-minded, lumbers forward to its duty. Nor the malicious and the sharpnosed, striking out wildly, in face of all odds, but only for the sake of its lunatic hitting and pricking, only yelping free of old constrictions, only loosening the metal band that presses its maladied brain.

No—the appearance of courage is one of deep, unalterable conviction. When the eyes seem distant, because they are thinking of the heart's purpose, because they are looking inwards, as if iris and pupil were drawn back to the inner hemisphere of the eyeball, looking inwards towards the heart. Yet parts of the eyes, with neither lust nor rapacious glitter, still survey coolly the material enemy outside. The face is serene, but purposeful. It is intent, yet the little muscles of expression are relaxed. This face no longer plays. Everything seen upon it now is an echo from within, unstudied, not an expression but a reflection. And the mouth, perhaps the corner of the mouth flexes briefly, almost in a smile, a recollective smile, considerative and wise. It is important, too, that the voice from that mouth, if it speaks at all, should sound solitary ; for there is a solitude in the clarity of pure intention. Such patience, such courage can be seen on the face of a woman ironing ; in the hands of a surgeon : and sometimes in the defenceless set of the shoulders of a figure turning away from a grave.

The day dawned foggy. We were on the beach early, after only a few hours of restless sleep. The fog lay out to sea like a wall of milk, as though the sea itself had turned upward. The water was smooth and white, it was impossible to tell where fog began and water disappeared. Of course, the lighthouse was obscured. Only a large red sun penetrated the fog, like the sun in some strange polar dream. This round red eye lay low and with the long rays of its rose light tinted our whitish, greyish, pearl-like world of early fog.

We were all three tired ; yet our nerves were sharply awake. There was a clean dew on the pebbles, and the moisture in the air was refreshing. The pebbles crunched under our seaboots as we walked forward, gradually waking up. Terence smoked a cigarette and coughed, Moon's face was burrowed down in her collar against the early chill. They wore oilskins, and beneath, dark fisherman's wool. We talked shortly of the tide, the fog, measuring the conditions to be met on the voyage. Once Terence trod on the

rind of a starfish and cursed. Moon tittered. Then suddenly out of the fog boomed the note of the lighthouse's powerful diaphone, low, toneless, impersonal.

It was a lonely note in the fog, and, though muffled, sounded much nearer than it could really have been. Terence listened carefully, waiting for it to repeat, as though debating the interval for a specific nautical reason. We walked on and up towards the boat. The atmosphere was above all things real. Perhaps, if there had been none of the drama of fog and red sun, if in fact there had been no unreal quality about the scene—then on a clear morning I might have felt an apprehension in the atmosphere. As it was, the queer fog made us feel all the more real. There was nothing heroic in the manner of Terence or Moon: only I sensed strongly, through their everyday manners, through what might have seemed nonchalance, the thread of expressionless, quiet courage.

The boat was wet with dew. The oiled rowlocks, the taired keel, the varnished wooden lockers gleamed through a rime of dew. We put down the rollers and began pushing the boat down to the edge of the sea, where little waves lapped and pulled.

The beach was empty. But by the time we had traversed the few boat-lengths to the water there had arrived quite an audience. They came wandering down the cliff path, climbing over the boulders along the beach, rowing round from the port in boats. In such a small community everyone knew that the boat had been finished on the previous day, that it would be launched that morning. Besides, Terence had made no secret of the voyage.

They gathered in a half-circle around us, keeping their distance. Those with boats sat hunched on the seats, their oars cased in the rowlocks, scarcely drifting on the still, full water. Hardly a word was spoken. The people seemed to be waiting. Perhaps they were reserving themselves for a later action? Occasionally now a finger pointed, sometimes we heard a quick whisper, a snigger. One old woman already had her thermos and sandwiches spread on the pebbles before her. She sat there munching, with her eyes never moving from us, contented to be squatting in judgment. And as this old woman's eyes watched us, so did some hundreds of others. The many eyes blended into one saurian gaze,

unblinking, an unrelenting encirclement of hostile willpower. It was powerful—I remember suddenly turning up my coat collar. However, we went on with our job, loading the boat, setting the oars, erecting the short mast. Once Terence straightened up and stared for a few moments back at them, turning his eyes slowly round the entire half-circle. Then he shrugged his shoulder perhaps a little helplessly, and gave a wry smile.

“What can you do?” he said.

Moon gritted her teeth and tugged too hard at the tarred line she was making fast. “Get the bloody boat ready,” she said, her voice ringing on the expletive so that it should be heard clearly.

Terence frowned at her. “Don’t let them think they’ve got you.”

I asked, “What are *they* going to do?”

But just then the boat was ready. Terence lifted Moon over the side, then pushed the keel free of the shingle. On the previous night they had invited me to travel with them. Perhaps they wished for some sort of impartial judgment of their act, perhaps I provided a little of the approval they were denied in their ordinary contacts with the community. They knew me to be an alien observer, to a great extent disinterested. I had agreed. So that now I jumped in and picked up the oars, while Terence set the single lateen sail and Moon took the tiller. We towed a dinghy in which I was to return.

As the boat slid silently away from the beach towards the fog, into the invisible region of the diaphone’s reiterant booming—there arose from the people a low hissing. At first a hiss, a parting of the lips in disgust, then a grumbling, a dreadful sound with no form, repressed and dangerous. But not one of those two or three hundred people moved. They sat quite still in a dreadful attitude of disapproval, of powerless hate. And not one of them softened: not one of that whole community grew ashamed of their bullying numbers. These people were a herd without sympathy. It was calculated murder of the spirit.

Then the fog took us. It slipped over us and around us, so that suddenly those hostile people were a thousand miles away and we were solitary in a quiet white world. The oars cut the water with a muffled splash. The windless sail flapped slackly, streaked with moisture, dripping fresh water

from its glistening boom into the salt sea. Sometimes a rope creaked, or the wooden tiller groaned in its shaft. Quiet sounds, that emphasized the damp and the invisibility. But as the dark bows nosed ever forward into the white wall, one sound, reiterant and tremendous, from far ahead, yet seeming to creep round now on every side, from above and below, one great sound boomed over us—the sustained grunting of the unseen fog-siren. Somewhere in the lighthouse a steel monster gulped out great lungfuls of pressed air through revolving fanlike lips, and then the sea vibrated mournfully for miles around. Yet, like the ticking of a little clock, it was soon part of the silence.

When the people had disappeared we had all breathed our relief and straightened up to our various tasks. But such relief is illusory. After the first impression of freedom the gloom, like a sense of guilt, returned. Moon sat crouched over the tiller, staring blankly at a crab that had somehow been washed below the floorboards. Terence caught my eye and shook his head sorrowfully. It must have disturbed him to see Moon so listless, again so beaten-looking, at the tiller of his craft: sometimes he must have questioned his right to include her in such a project. Or if it had been of her volition, ought he not to have tried to dissuade her? Without the event of an enemy, alone with one's automatic muscles, there is time to think. Although proceeding in a set direction, the brain freewheels back to the old alternatives. The measurement of the goal's ultimate worth begins again.

Suddenly from behind us we heard the soft *thudding of other rowboats. They were following us! Once more we heard the soft hissing. If it had not been for the sounds of rowing, muffled but definite, the hissing might have seemed like the malignant voice of the fog itself, it was so general, so gaseous. Moon raised her head and listened. Her eyes brightened, she grew alive again! There was nothing to be seen, but it did us good to know that the enemy was near again, so deeply had they affected us.

They kept their distance. The voyage continued, quietly through the limbo of fog, monotonous, for long neutral hours. There was nothing to do, nothing to say. It was the enemy who maintained in us the alertness of endeavour. Without them we should have questioned ourselves.

Much later—the sudden screech of electric horns! Sharp-

ness tearing through the fog! The dinning of powerful engines! It came at us from every side, roaring up in a crescendo that threatened to shatter the grey molecules that hung in the air, so that I imagined the fog might suddenly drop, like a bead curtain cut down. Once again Terence said "The Pinnacles!"

But this time he said it without excitement. He had been expecting the harbourmaster. Instinctively he tightened the collar of his oilskin jacket, as though gathering together his weapons. There was no more than that to be done. We waited. The thunder vibrated louder. I clutched the gunwale, bracing myself somehow against the coming shock. It seemed inevitable that we should be rammed. Imagination blurred the white fog with shadows of giant, shapeless hulks, of fierce hydroplane prows, knifelike with speed. Terence rose from his seat and stood there, listening, straining his eyes at the impenetrable. I saw Moon hunching her shoulders, staring up with dazed eyes: not to the side—her face was raised and she was staring *upwards*! As the sound grew even louder, Terence's eyes too raised themselves slowly towards the fogbank above us. I thought, aeroplanes? But looking closer at the bewildered, newly passive expression in their eyes I began to feel what they must have felt. They were not looking for pinnacles, nor aeroplanes, but . . . retribution.

Things, you see, had been going too well. Although we had passed through the people's scorn, there had as yet been no direct challenge, no halting. Though chilling to the soul, the voyage had been uninterrupted. Perhaps we had all known this, and so had arisen in us a sense of retribution, that submerged conviction that the good things cannot last, and that there must be compensation. The complementary character of good and evil. Throughout our lives we had associated this thought with all manifestations of great power, with the solitude of great mountains, the nightmare of great storms, the sound of thunder. Now it was the tremendous dinning of the invisible engines around us that provoked a sensation of awe. Old images, flashes from our first dreams—the beating of angel's wings, the thrashing of winds shaped like old men with furrowed brows and blown out cheeks, even the indistinct dark face of the watching God himself—all the ariel threatnings of childhood. No more was this

the thunder of engines, of enemy motors—but something more general, something infinite, a thrumming of the heavens that awoke what was half fear yet also part an intuition and patient acceptance of justice. This all in perhaps a few seconds . . . while the hydroplanes were circling round us.

Suddenly the sound collapsed, moaned down to a quiet oiled clattering. The engines were close, ticking over and drifting. Then, from somewhere on the starboard, a megaphone hailed us. "Observance Craft here. Heave to! Observance Craft calling you to heave to!"

Terence made no answer but sat down quietly and took up his oar again. Every sound seemed queerly magnified to our blind ears. We rowed forward silently. Even the water dripping from our oarblades seemed to echo dangerously.

Things approach quickly in the fog. Moon tried to swing the tiller round—but too late. Out of the fog had drifted suddenly the wraith of a boat's prow. We thudded against it, bounced, swung back again, and then the grappling irons were on us. A young man dressed in an official sea-green jersey was touching his peaked cap and making a formal apology.

Terence cut him short. "Throw off your irons," he shouted abruptly. He was still resting on his oar, purposely holding it back to begin rowing again. "You've no right to stop us."

The young official touched his cap again. His lips spread in a smile of ingratiating politeness, while separately his eyes shifted from side to side searching the interior of our boat. Presumably he was looking for some defect or illegal fixture. "Our apologies, but it's your routine inspection," he said.

"We're on the high seas. It's not in order out of port."

"But you sailed before we had time," answered the official, his eyes still searching, beginning to frown in his disappointment.

Terence said, raising his voice sullenly, "We sent in the papers two days ago. Besides, you know as well as I do that the whole port was talking of our project. It was common knowledge."

The official did not answer this, but instead spread his hands as though to indicate emptiness. It was rather too theatrical a gesture to suggest simply that he had no answer

for us—but perhaps it was really intended as a signal to other officials watching him. For instantly a hand popped up from behind the bulwark at his side—the man must have been listening to the whole conversation—and brandished a paper so that the official should see and take it. At the same moment the engines ceased ticking over. As he read the first words, a look of the most forlorn misery spread across his face. He looked up at us, almost with tears in his eyes, certainly with lips that quivered in pain. “I beg your pardon, but I’ve just heard, I have it written here”—at this point he shook the paper at us almost triumphantly—“that we’re in trouble. Our engines have failed. We’re lost, becalmed, stranded miles from land, in a most perilous fog. It is inevitable that we shall founder, perhaps with all hands . . . unless—oh, sir!—unless perhaps you could see your way to giving us a tow back into port? Oh, please—we shall be so grateful, the Harbourmaster will see personally that you are rewarded, we can spare the men to row, it will be no extra trouble for you . . .” And the fellow removed his cap and held it across his face. He was shivering with great sobs.

Terence laughed sourly. Then he shouted at the top of his voice, thumping with his free hand on the varnished seat beside him, “Throw off those grappling irons!”

Instantly another official stepped from the low green-painted cabin and, paying no attention whatsoever to Terence’s request, began to speak amiably of the fishing nets in the locality. He told us how the poor of the community existed on the mackerel catch, how the keel of a boat—why a boat with just such a low draft as ours!—might tear the net and mean starvation for whole families. In fact, he told exactly the story of fictitious nets that Terence had outlined the previous evening, when we had watched the parley between the hydroplanes and the errant electric yacht.

As soon as he had finished, Terence shouted his request again, as though nothing had been said. A third official appeared and began relating to us the unfortunate story of certain people who in the past had set foot upon the lighthouse rock. Again the story that Terence had anticipated—a tale of madness and emaciated bodies, of unmentionable horror, clearly calculated to terrify us from our object. The official accompanied his words with dramatic gestures,

sometimes cowering back at the vision he evoked, sometimes throwing an arm abjectly across his face, sometimes pointing an accusing finger at the fog in general. And all the time, like neighbours on a first visit, the others fidgeted nervously with their fingers and searched the little boat unceasingly with sharp darting eyes.

Suddenly there was music. It hit the air heavily, weighing in over us, full, viscous music from a reedy orchestra playing a sentimental ballad. Terence could contain himself no longer. He reached for the grappling irons and commenced throwing them off. There was no resistance. The officials stopped talking and looked at each other in amazement. But they made no attempt to prevent Terence. I began helping him, and soon the last of those heavy black hooks clanged down to the side of the pinnaces. "I wish to heaven I'd tried this before," Terence muttered. "But I didn't really know they wouldn't fight. In this fog they could do anything—I should have thought. But I suppose their rules are too false and too valuable for them to risk." The boats drifted apart. The fog began to intervene, accelerating the growing interval. In a moment we should have been hidden—if just at that very instant the sun had not broken through. Pale red rays shone through and the fog began to rarefy, to lift!

In a few minutes the sea was clear, except for a light mist, and there we were, floating in the full view of three or four hydroplanes that drifted in a rough circle round us. Only ahead was there still any fog. It lay like a bank across the path of our voyage and over the lighthouse itself.

One of the hydroplanes, larger than the others, carried a more intricate arrangement of radio masts, and its green sides were marked with certain authoritative numbers. This vessel now came chugging to within hailing distance. A flag was run up. An old man stepped up from the cabin and stood facing us on the deck.

The officials nearest to us, who had been standing awkwardly against the low taffrail, looking self-conscious and unsure of their next actions, now straightened up and began to nod to each other with an onrush of assurance. They smiled towards us, raised their eyebrows and shrugged their shoulders in that quizzical, cynical attitude—"I told you so." It is interesting to note how at the beginning of our parley these

officials had been supremely certain of themselves, how very quickly they had faltered and become hopeless in the face of Terence's refusal to accept their well-rehearsed arguments, and again with what speed they had revived at the sight of the man now approaching us. They were plainly sailors schooled in the doctrine of their green liveries alone, without knowledge of the reasons beneath it, or the arguments that might be levied against it. Now with what relief they returned to the safety of their doctrine! How helpless they must have felt without it!

Terence turned to us and whispered quickly, "It's the Harbourmaster. Be careful." Moon smiled back at him, but I saw her lip curling dangerously. Crouched at the tiller, with her carrotty hair glowing in the light of the mournful red sun, her bosom breathing too fast, Moon was nearing the end of her patience. Her independent female spirit had been subjected to too much.

That lunar sunlight, that frosted sun from a fairy tale reddening dimly behind the veil of mist—that lit the figure of the harbourmaster too. It tinted with red the whale-green uniform and the grey strands of his beard. As the hydroplane drifted in, with the old man alone on the centre of his deck, his hands clasped behind his back, and his back slightly bowed with the years—the beard alone moved. It sailed a little in the wind, flowing to one side of a statue.

The vessel drifted alongside us. The harbourmaster began to speak. His wizened walnut face with its thick grey eyebrows gazed down at us in paternal sympathy, compassionate but disappointed. "I have heard," he said, in a voice of prayer, "that you intend to proceed with your craft on the course of the—the lighthouse. I have heard, my children, how you have put aside the advice of the people, and now, finally, the pleading of my officers. Yes, it may be freely admitted that certain ruses were employed to distract you from your intention. That was indeed so. But . . . they were employed for your good, when it seemed that simple advice was beyond avail."

He paused, drawing a deep breath, a breath of resignation. This confession of tactic was surprising. But I saw Terence screwing up his eyes, perhaps the more distrustful at the old man's pretension of frankness.

The harbourmaster continued: "I have devoted all my

life to darkening this idea of the lighthouse, this fateful lighthouse. I and my predecessors realized deeply its dangers. Aspects of consuming pleasure, ecstasies murderous to the soul are the facets of its lantern. Its contemplation is death to the spirit. Its wild light fascinates, maddens, kills. But . . . this you have known, this you welcome." He raised his arms towards us in a gesture of embrace, of supplication. "Why, my children," he intoned, "could you not have been content to make your official application for a visit? That is the tragedy."

"You old humbug! Because we wouldn't be meddled with!" It was Moon, standing up in the stern, with her fists clenched, shrieking, weeping with indignation. "Because it's our private affair, ours, ours, *ours*—and nothing to do with you or the Port or the people or—or—or . . ." she broke off, sobbing. Terence stepped across the seats and put his arm round her shoulders. Then he looked up at the harbourmaster. "She's right," he said quickly, with calm expression, above anger now. "That's why. Now—go."

The harbourmaster glanced shrewdly at Moon, then pursed his lips and sighed. He took off his cap as though the action were some beginning to a final ceremony. He whispered, "I understand." Then grief seemed to wrinkle his old face, and he beckoned with his whole arm towards the cabin. In a shaken voice he called, "Ursula, and little David, I want you." He stared with downcast head to the deck. It seemed as though he were holding back the tears. From the cabin came a large, red-faced woman, dressed in voluminous black, with a feathered black bonnet, with a dark down on her lip and chin. She led by the hand a little boy dressed in a green sailor suit. They stood, one on each side of the old harbourmaster, who held their hands in his.

At length he said, "This is my wife, and this my little boy—my dear family in whose bosom I first conceived and thereafter executed the lifelong task to which I am devoted. All my work has been performed in the knowledge of their love. But now you—with your wilfulness—seek to dishonour the fruit of these labours."

"Thus the time has come when I must admit, with deep regret, nothing less than my failure. I must admit this and know therefore that there is but one thing more for me to do. For me and my beloved family."

He sobbed once. Then he stiffened to an attitude of attention, took a step forward—and threw himself into the sea, dragging his shrieking family behind him.

We stood there too amazed to move. We watched the splash, then the grey water closing over them, the little bubbles, the harbourmaster's green cap floating alone. I cannot remember the sea looking more deep than then.

A sudden scuffling in the boat! Another splash! Terence had thrown off his oilskins and was floundering in the water by the cap!

We saw him shake his head, take a breath, arch his body into a dive. As he went down, the harbourmaster's wife came floating up. Then the little boy David, thrashing out busily with puppydog hands. And after a second, a long second with the sea flat and the thought of those two bodies somewhere beneath, Terence came up dragging the old man by his collar.

They were struggling. The harbourmaster was fighting to release himself from Terence's grip. But his back was to Terence, and so he was forced to let fly with foreshortened arms over his shoulder, nearly strangling himself as he did so. As he hit at Terence, he kept grunting through the churned water, "Down again, Ursula—don't give in! Drown, drown . . .!" He grunted desperately, throwing back his head to shout to his wife, who was floating with her black skirt spread out around her like an umbrella.

Now she beat the water with her arms, trying hard to gather in her skirt and so obey the command of her master and sink once more. But there came another splash from the stern of our boat. Moon had dived.

She swam over swiftly to the sinking woman, cutting through the water like a surface-riding fish. Already the massive red face was disappearing. But Moon was there in time to clutch the last of her skirt.

For a moment it seemed that the old woman would drag Moon down with her. Then her head emerged once more, and with it the whole skirt. She commenced to scratch and splutter and fight like her husband. Moon clung to her. As they thrashed the water, the great black skirt sometimes muffled the one, sometimes whipped itself round the arms of the other, as though it had life and purpose of its own, as though it were one huge webbed tentacle blindly feeling for a victim to smother.

There was a madness and horror in the air. Yet beyond this—and perhaps herein lay the aspect of madness—the sight was ludicrous. Those two splashing skirmishes with the small boy swimming in little jerky circles round them! In the limited water space between the boats, arranged and boundaried like the bath for a water polo match, the scuffling looked sometimes like a game, a bathers' romp, with its splashing and short breathless cries. And yet it was a fight to the drowning death. Beneath, deeply beneath, there waited the hungry weeds, the nibbling snouts of cold fishes, the little black eyes and claws and furred feelers of spidery shellfish. And the deepsea gloom.

Gradually the movement of their battling took them towards the hydroplane. Gradually both couples drifted further from our boat and nearer to the darker green of the water beneath the hydroplane's hull.

Suddenly I heard the sound of an engine. The hydroplane's propellers began softly to churn up a small foam astern. It bubbled up secretly, as though the propellers were turning very slowly and quietly, to avoid being noticed.

Yet even above the old man's grunting, the sound must have caught Terence's ear. They had drifted now beneath the hull's shadow. I saw a startled look in Terence's eye as he must suddenly have become aware of the shadow, as he heard the churning of the propellers—and then the old man swung round and hit him full in the face. The blow parted them. Terence sank beneath the surface.

With a high triumphant growl, his eyes wild with water and savage joy, his bedraggled beard maned about his face, and even strands of it caught in his mouth, the old harbour-master dived after Terence.

Once again the seconds became hours as I watched the flat sea and wondered about the sinking bodies beneath. I thought of stories of pearl divers, of the minutes a man can remain underwater on the same breath. Possible figures flashed across my brain, stupid statistical records that would form themselves into no order. Then I saw the sea as a bottle, as a bottle of country wine in the making, with peculiar white pellets rising from the bottom and then sinking again, the "bees," horrid pellets with a machine-like activity, rising and sinking, rising and ever sinking.

Suddenly Terence's head bobbed up. He shook the

water from his eyes and looked round, saw Moon, began to wave with one arm towards her. He shouted, "Moon! Moon! He's got a line tied to his foot! They've been dragging us over! Drop her—and back to the boat as fast as you can!"

Even beneath the muffling skirt, Moon heard. She thrust the old woman from her and began to cut back to the boat. The old woman tried to grab her, failed, then began to wail and shout down through the deaf water to the harbour-master, who was still swimming beneath.

But he was still swimming and waiting when Moon and Terence were heaving themselves up into the boat again.

Just then there came a boom like a thunderclap. It sounded right in our ears, numbing them, closing our eyes with its force so that the world was all sound. It was the diaphone, almost above us. We were within a few lengths of the lighthouse!

Through the thinning fog it appeared to us. First a white line of foam, then the dark hulk of rock, and at last the glowing opaque wall of the base of the lighthouse itself.

We shouted, but the siren drowned all sound. I saw Moon's and Terence's mouths wide and yelling, soundless but in dumb show all the louder. Their eyes were enfevered. We bent our backs and in three strokes the boat was swung round against an iron ladder, Terence was up in the bows with a painter, making fast, clambering onto the iron rungs, waiting there with his hands downstretched for Moon.

Moon went past me without a word. I was forgotten. Just then the booming cut off. Instantly a picture of other sounds took its place. It was as though there had been silence before, and now the various noises of life had been switched suddenly on. I heard the lapping of waves, the creaking of the boat, the piping of gulls high up by the lantern, and echoing more softly as they climbed, the diminishing stamping of two pairs of seaboots on the high iron ladder. . . .

When at last I turned round, the fog had risen and the sea stretching back to the port was wide and sparkling, like chipped blue glass. Retreating puffs of spray just rounding the mole showed that the hydroplanes had given up: and small coloured dots beneath the cliff moved slowly as the rowboats dawdled home. I cast off the dinghy and pulled back to the beach, without event.

Terence had asked me to stay on at the cottage. I was to clear up his affairs. The days passed quietly. I had plenty of time to muse over the voyage, and to reflect on the satisfaction of witnessing a desire such as theirs actually achieved.

A fortnight later, by pigeon, came a letter.

" . . . At first it was fine," wrote Terence, " and both of us were entranced by the idea of being in the lighthouse, really and truly inside, of looking out to sea through windows that are lighthouse windows, of examining the shining mechanism within. I cannot describe the wonders revealed to us during the first days when we climbed the iron staircase from chamber to chamber. But in short—a world utterly strange to us, and in every detail entrancing in its shocks and its novelties. So many of the old values transposed, so much subtly out of drawing. Little things, like the shape of the latches, or the odd design of a fanlight. Nothing is the same as it is on land. And everything is destined to one end, unlike the landward purpose of things, which seems so varied and uncertain. Yes, here every machine and material in this mounting organism is purposed towards the light that is poured out from the lantern above. The dynamos, the oil-rooms, the ancient ancillary devices of wick and gas, and, of course, the accoutrement of the diaphone. Every rod of steel, every slip of glass is polished bright. Never have I known such cleanliness, such inspired efficiency: yet this would be expected, for after all so much depends upon the right working of the light. And there is light, softly coloured, everywhere.

" Yet beneath our first joy I remember now that I felt a hint of dissatisfaction, as though I wished to sit down, to stretch my legs, breathe quietly, watch the blank glass wall, in possession and waiting for nothing. Who would come and what would happen ?

" Then—on I think the third day—we entered a room about three quarters the way up the tower, and we met there two people, a man and a woman.

" It seems that these two people had come to the lighthouse many years ago. Since then they have lived here, wandering to and fro up and down the tower, enclosed within the glass walls and bathed perpetually in the beautiful coloured light that glows everywhere. They were naked—there is no purpose in wearing clothes here—and . . . but it is difficult to

describe these people. Perhaps I might try with their eyes, eyes that are white and blind, like the eyes of subterranean creatures. Or could you imagine a dreadful sloth of movement, when it takes perhaps a whole forenoon for the hand to raise a cup to the lips, slow but moving steadily, like petals spreading for the sun, a paralysed languor, and always accompanied with the same satiated explanation from their dulled lips, 'For what purpose would we move more quickly?'

"I asked them about the equipment—whether it was not a task to maintain it in such shining order? But it seems that these people have nothing to do. If there are lighthouse-keepers, which must be the case, then they are never seen. No, these people have nothing to do. They achieved their tower of light, they chose to live in it, and now they are saturated. They move, they just move slowly from room to room, dragging their pallid heels across the floor, staring with blind eyes, a vegetable existence in the hum of colour and warmth. Never despondent, never lonely—they have slowed down beyond ennui.

"Can this be the price of possession, of achievement? Can this really be the end to which all our bright struggles and our leaden determinations are directed? If it is indeed so, then all ends are illusory, and only strife real. Is it that? Do we only live during the moments of hope, of desire, of effort? Here in this beautiful lighthouse, this beautiful and useful thing, I begin to believe this. That finalities are hollow as the air, that rightly they do not exist: or, if you are unfortunate enough strangely to meet finality, then you must meet a dreadful thing, the bread of torpor, something of your own mad limitation in a scheme where all matters should be healthily infinite . . ."

That was Terence's letter. Every day after receiving it I walked out to the end of the mole, expecting to see the little boat returning. But it never came. And then much later I received a second letter.

" . . . I have smashed the boat and built a raft. An amazing thing has happened! Did you know that a little further on from the lighthouse there is another group of rocks? Perhaps not, for they are nearly submerged. In fact, they are invisible from the land. But from the lighthouse windows we saw them, three or four wet blackish hummocks that send

up light veils of spindrift, almost as though they were whales, and the spindrift their watery gusts of breath. The rocks are only a few minutes pull from the lighthouse. One day Moon and I decided to visit them—there was a sparkle about them that somehow fascinated us.

“By a great stroke of good fortune we arrived there at low tide. You have no idea what we found !

“We found a garden !

“Wild, a wild garden, and secretive. The garden grows under the lip of smooth rock, in the hundred thousand honeycomb cells that the sea has carved. And now we spend, must spend all our time trying to botanize the sea-lichens and other things that grow here.

“Perhaps we shall succeed, perhaps one day we shall complete our marvellous collection. Heaven knows—we have set our hearts on it. But it is hard, our enemy is the tide. No sooner is the garden revealed and the flowers exposed to our plucking fingers, when the tide inevitably turns, and before long the water is creeping back. The little waves lapping higher and higher echo our heartbeats as we pluck against tide and time, the inexorables, those terrible enemies of ours. But one day we shall beat them, one day we shall win.

“You know what they are like, these wonderful underwater plants ? Bright yellow weeds that flow like the water itself, short fat stubbles pregnant with air-sacs, sudden clusters of fine pink hairs, black globules of plant-flesh like freshly gleaming eyeballs, arid sprays of green bone, laces of supple coral, white antlers, and perhaps from some crevice dark with still water the sharp pink licking of a nest of tongues ! Who knows whether these lichens, weeds, flowers, fungi are plants or waking animals ? Who cares ? They and their little caves are like nothing we have ever desired before. They are a new world, kept secret from us by the tide, hidden by the water that has imposed upon them a dark and slow and airless life. But a life for jewels in a land of marvellous crevices, pools, caves, jungles. And over all the salt slime, the rubbery skins, the oiled lustres.

“Sometimes we visit the lighthouse. The lighthouse has its uses for us—it is in no way to be rejected. Yet we live here by the rocks, on our raft, botanizing against the tide. Shall we succeed ? Oh, but we are determined, determined

to succeed against this imperious tide. We shall succeed. We must.

"Of course, my friend, you may think me wrong. You may think—'Terence has smashed his boat and built a raft. First he alienated himself from the shore, and next from the lighthouse.' Certainly. But—do you not see—we can always smash our raft and build again a boat . . . ?"

DIFFICULTY WITH A BOUQUET

SEAL, walking through his garden, said suddenly to himself: "I would like to pick some flowers and take them to Miss D."

The afternoon was light and warm. Tall chestnuts fanned themselves in a pleasant breeze. Among the hollyhocks there was a good humming as the bees tumbled from flower to flower. Seal wore an open shirt. He felt fresh and fine, with the air swimming coolly under his shirt and around his ribs. The summer's afternoon was free. Nothing pressed him. It was a time when some simple, disinterested impulse might well be hoped to flourish.

Seal felt a great joy in the flowers around him and from this a brilliant longing to give. He wished to give quite inside himself, uncritically, without thinking for a moment: "Here am I, Seal, wishing something." Seal merely wanted to give some of his flowers to a fellow being. It had happened that Miss D was the first person to come to mind. He was in no way attached to Miss D. He knew her slightly, as a plain, elderly girl of about twenty who had come to live in the flats opposite his garden. If Seal had ever thought about Miss D at all, it was because he disliked the way she walked. She walked stiffly, sailing with her long body while her little legs raced to catch up with it. But he was not thinking of this now. Just by chance he had glimpsed the block of flats as he had stooped to pick a flower. The flats had presented the image of Miss D to his mind.

Seal chose some common, ordinary flowers. As the stems broke he whistled between his teeth. He had chosen these

ordinary flowers because they were the nearest to hand: in the second place, because they were fresh and full of life. They were neither rare nor costly. They were pleasant, fresh, unassuming flowers.

With the flowers in his hand, Seal walked contentedly from his garden and set foot on the asphalt pavement that led to the block of flats across the way. But as his foot touched the asphalt, as the sly glare of an old man fixed his eye for the moment of its passing, as the traffic asserted itself, certain misgivings began to freeze his impromptu joy. "Good heavens," he suddenly thought, "what am I doing?" He stepped outside himself and saw Seal carrying a bunch of cheap flowers to Miss D in the flats across the way.

"These are cheap flowers," he thought. "This is a sudden gift. I shall smile as I hand them to her. We shall both know that there is no ulterior reason for the gift and thus the whole action will smack of goodness—of goodness and simple brotherhood. And somehow . . . for that reason this gesture of mine will appear to be the most calculated pose of all. Such a simple gesture is improbable. The improbable is to be suspected. My gift will certainly be regarded as an affection."

"Oh, if only I had some reason—aggrandisement, financial gain, seduction—any of the accepted motives that would return my flowers to social favour. But no—I have none of these in me. I only wish to give and to receive nothing in return."

As he walked on, Seal could see himself bowing and smiling. He saw himself smile too broadly as he apologized by exaggeration for his good action. His neck flinched with disgust as he saw himself assume the old bravados. He could see the mocking smile of recognition on the face of Miss D.

Seal dropped the flowers into the gutter and walked slowly back to his garden.

From her window high up in the concrete flats, Miss D watched Seal drop the flowers. How fresh they looked! How they would have livened her barren room! "Wouldn't it have been nice," thought Miss D, "if that Mr. Seal had been bringing *me* that pretty bouquet of flowers! Wouldn't it have been nice if he had picked them in his own garden and—well, just brought them along, quite casually, and

made me a present of the delightful afternoon." Miss D dreamed on for a few minutes.

Then she frowned, rose, straightened her suspender belt, hurried into the kitchen. "Thank God he didn't," she sighed to herself. "I should have been most embarrassed. It's not as if he wanted me. It would have been just too maudlin for words."

IN THE MAZE

I

THE tourist was surprised to find himself being led down a side street, in just the opposite direction to where he was sure the maze lay. However he made no mention of his misgiving. He had been impressed by the sincerity of his guide at their first meeting on the station platform, and for this reason could not believe that the man intended to lead him astray. Perhaps this side street curved to meet a lower main road to the maze? Yet it was odd that his guide had not accepted one of the carriages that waited on the high road by the station gate.

Once again he glanced over his shoulder. The maze was receding below the gables of a house on the corner: twin gables that mounted as their passage took them lower down the hill, so that the black crest of the distant maze appeared to set like a dark sun behind the irregular horizon of the roof-tops. Then it was gone! And the tourist had only the memory of his first view of the maze from the station upon which to base his speculations.

The maze had been plainly outlined on the brow of a hill some five kilometres away. Even at that distance its huge proportions had been evident. Several houses lay on the slope of the hill, and the maze loomed above these monstrously, with no perceptible animal shape, yet with the presence of something that lived and waited. It hung across the whole length of the hill, which must have measured at least two kilometres. Yet this façade represented only the

narrow beginning of the great maze: the guide himself had explained that its shape was generally like that of a halberd-head, and this façade its narrowest extremity. The hill was really a gradual escarpment introducing the immeasurable plateau that lay above: as far as was known, the maze's dark vegetation quite covered this flat, upper plain.

The cobbles of the side street scrambled steeply down between tall houses that obstructed any further view. Thus the tourist fixed his eyes on the back of his guide, who walked always a few steps before him. The guide—who would more correctly be styled "the topiarist"—wore a suit of rough hempen material designed, with subtle buttoning and certain discreet twists of the stitch, to infer a uniform, though at the same time the general effect was informal and thus calculated to reassure a sensitive stranger. On his head he wore a shooting cap, but round his waist was clasped a light brown belt from which hung only a long pair of shears. He walked confidently, with long and certain legs, and every so often he glanced back at his charge with a considerative smile. The tourist was impressed by this combination of discreet efficiency and cordiality: this topiarist was a fellow with whom one felt secure!

They stepped from the cobbles onto a wide mudtrack. Now the land to either side was again visible. As he splashed along in the wet mud behind his guide, the tourist noted that their way led towards what appeared to be a basin of marshland, judging by the clustered reeds and the sunken trunks of old trees that rose and fell forlornly in the flat, black earth ahead. But away to the left—on the opposite side of the mudtrack to the maze—there rose a high city. The tourist was astonished at the size and height of this city: for he had not noticed it from the train, and, apart from the maze, it seemed the most prominent edifice of the neighbouring landscape. At first it seemed that the city, too, was built on a hill: but soon it became plain that this was an illusion caused by a gradation in height from the modest houses on the outskirts of the city to the towers and tremendous minarets of the centremost buildings. Every variety of brick and tile and stone seemed to have been used in the construction of this town: elevated motorways wound gracefully through the mass of buildings, curling always upwards to the summit of the highest tower: high raised platforms awaited the descent

of aircraft: and over the whole there whispered a sense of continual movement, as an unending stream of faraway beetles crawled up and down the motorways and as midget helicopters circled the upper air with the inconsequent industry of a cloud of gnats.

The tourist could contain himself no longer. He doubled his stride to catch up with the topiarist. Catching him by the arm, he asked, respectfully, but with a certain insistence, "Possibly there has been a misunderstanding? My intention was to inspect the maze—not this town. Surely our road"—he gestured vaguely towards the direction of the plateau—"should lie in that direction?" Throughout this question he had tried to define the topiarist's eyes: but these lay so deep in the shade of his peaked cap that, although the tourist peeped now with almost impolite insistence, he could see nothing at all.

"Don't worry," answered the smiling lips of the topiarist. "Although another route might have brought us to our destination with more speed, yet this is the only road by which a visitor may reach the maze with intelligence. One might say, the motive for the maze lies along this road. In a moment I shall explain: meanwhile, we have plenty of time."

This news hardly reassured the tourist, who now watched closely the smile on his companion's lips. Divested of the eyes, the mouth formed a smile which might have been more disdainful than affable. Could this be an illusion created by the absence of soft eyes? Enhanced by the intrinsic quality of a mouth, with its predatory teeth and lascivious lips? The tourist would have pressed home his question, had it not been for a sudden shadow that darkened their path and forced both to look quickly above.

It had approached in complete silence. Its huge horizontal propeller cut the air without sound. It hovered directly above their heads, within hailing distance—a giant helicopter glistening streamlined white.

A low voice broke from the helicopter. "Perimeter Patrol. Any way I can assist you gentlemen?"

The topiarist gestured impatiently with his arm as if to wave the great air-ship off. "Nothing!" he shouted. And the helicopter with a muttered "Thank you" darted up and away, as though attached elastically to a higher altitude

above the town. Now the tourist showed great consternation as he grabbed the topiarist's arm afresh. "It seemed to me," he stammered anxiously, "that the helicopter itself spoke! What a strange illusion! It could not have been . . . ?"

But the topiarist interrupted him. "By all means—the helicopter spoke. It is true now to say that. Of course, there are still men somewhere inside it. But long ago they surrendered their personalities absolutely to the machine of their building. Now they have not only merged with the machine—they have lost themselves in it. They have, in the natural order of such matters, been superseded by their invention. Yes, the helicopter spoke."

The tourist glanced nervously at the city, then sucked expertly at a hollow tooth. This was a nervous habit that cleared his mouth of inefficiency. It pulled things together. As usual when he was embarrassed, when the alignment of his thought was upset, he repeated his companion's last words. "In the natural order of such matters—you mean that all your people are consumed in this fatal way by their invention? You mean that?"

The mud was growing blacker as the marshland approached. Also deeper. The topiarist had to draw a cloth from his pocket and wipe away some of the slime that was splashing up on to his bright shears. At the same time he spoke, with an easy derisive laugh that seemed to mock the tourist's ignorance. "You come to me with a permit to see the maze. But it is becoming plainer every moment that you have little idea of the maze's real significance. Perhaps you are joy-riding? Perhaps you come to marvel only sensually, in a spirit of credulous disbelief, with no intention at all of understanding?" The long peak of the shooting cap and the deep mask of the shade beneath regarded the tourist sternly, yet with a degree of tolerance, as though the tourist, although guilty, was of no great matter and in any case could hardly be capable of escape. For his part, the tourist resented his companion's attitude of comfortable, derisive strength: nevertheless he made no complaint, feeling indeed a trifle awed by the man's certainty. So—"I am only a tourist," he explained.

"Quite so. And as Topiarist I feel it my responsibility to bring you understanding of the things you see. In addition to your own desire, as a tourist, for titillation. That is why

I have chosen for you this circuitous route past the town and the halcyonry. The halcyonry lies immediately ahead, on the marsh."

The topiarist now took the tourist's arm, gently, but with irrefutable certainty, in order to swivel the tourist in whichever direction the exposition of his story demanded. They had entered on the marsh proper. The track continued, but now the soil was black and fibrous with peat. Tall reeds and low, big-leaved bog-plants decided one side of the path: on the other flowed a slow stream. Their steps now made no sound but a short, resilient sucking as they trod into the waterous earth. Over all else lay the dead quiet of soft textures. To the west, high against the sky, rose the towers of the city, their summits blurred by the helicoptrous cloud.

"You asked me whether all our people are consumed by their invention," began the topiarist. "The answer—gratefully NO—has been made possible by the halcyonry here, the maze, and a wise man whose name has long been forgotten but who is respectfully referred to nowadays as the Arboretor. It is like this. Many years ago the Arboretor took his evening stroll along this same mudtrack. Tired out by the incessant striving of a day spent within the city, he found repose in this peaceful dwelling of the halcyons. He liked the quiet mud, he enjoyed the surrounding disintegration that stocked so much new life. He liked the halcyons and their primitive nests. It was one evening when he stood silently regarding the skeleton of a bird that had died on its nest of mud and fishbone, that his eyes wandered to a living halcyon which stood alone in splendid colour on the bank across the stream, and thence, above the proud bird, to the towers of the distant town. Between these three objects he found a relation, and read into it a meaning that has since altered the direction of our lives.

"Come, let us for the sake of simplicity recreate the scene as the Arboretor first saw it, and as thousands have seen it since. It should be easy. The hour is twilight."

From beneath the peak of his cap, which seemed to have grown longer and more pointed, until it began to resemble the beak of a bird, the topiarist scanned the stream with his shadowed eyes. He led the tourist along the bank until they arrived at the outskirts of the halcyon's great nesting place.

Here thousands of the live birds lived among the bones of

their ancestors. Brilliantly feathered, long-beaked, they stood by the banks of the stream, each one alone, each in solitary conjecture. Among the reeds and the marsh plants lay the nests, primitive rounds of dried mud interlaced with the bones of captured fish. Some of these were the nests of living birds: others were the dead nests, on which still sat thin, eyeless skeletons of the departed. A wide, wild ossuary where the living birds stood and thought with the appearance of brilliant ghosts.

"You will notice," said the topiarist, in tones of reverence, "how the halcyons recognize the measure of their significance. They break from their eggs, they build their fairly involved nests, they live with their dead, and they die. They do not hide death away. They do not say, 'We, who can build such fine, involved nests, shudder to think that our glory shall never increase. We must hide away the insignificance of death.' No. For them death has its own significance. It is a fulfilment. It throws into correct perspective the value of their achievement, the nest. They do not deny that the nest has great value, nor that the instinct and the proud hopes that inspire its building are also of great value. But they do realize that the achievement is not greater than the instinct. Thus they live beyond the building of their nests. They live with the bones of their achievement." Here the topiarist raised the darkness of his upper face towards the town. "It is a different matter with the people who used to populate the town. They never saw that hope was finite in itself. They yearned always towards the achievement bred of their hope, and gave hope itself no place in their estimation. It is, of course, right and natural to regard the achievement as important, otherwise hope could not exist. But the people gave fulfilment the prior importance, and forgot to see that in the meantime they lived."

The tourist frowned. "Nevertheless, you will admit that the hoped for achievements of your people were more complicated than these miserable nests?"

"More complicated, yes. More difficult ever to realize, yes. But of more ultimate meaning, of greater value?"

The tourist blurted angrily, "Please be sensible. You forget that man has a brain, to say nothing of a soul. Whereas these fine halcyons of yours are after all comparatively clumsy creatures guided by simple instincts."

The tourist's complaint was met only with the same laughter, though perhaps the derision was now more marked, as though the smiling lips had approached nearer the core of their humour. "That is the point," said the lips. "The Arboretor realized that man was sharply distinguished from other species by a brain. The Arboretor then saw that the brain was not the transcendental matter of its own self-assertion—but merely another limb, peculiar truly to man. So the Arboretor climbed outside his brain to look at his brain from the outside, and saw his brain, though miraculously still through the agency of his brain, as a limb—certainly an unusual limb, with an unusual function, a phenomenon of the same order as, say, the tongue of an ant-bear."

"Don't be absurd. You are just like a writer, who once wrote a story, and was overjoyed at the alliterational coincidence of a tourist, a topiarist, and a tapir, which he found at the same time stupid and deep with meaning. Perhaps this was because he had just seen, through the window, a sparrow to snatch up a fallen flower of jasmin in its beak and brandish it in the air—with much the same guileless exuberance as a puffed trader delivering himself to the ecstasy of a riviera rock. Perhaps the writer climbed outside his brain then, for he welcomed this wild phenomenon, which is commonly the battlemate of ordered achievement."

The topiarist sighed. "But it hardly matters whether this writer was a fool or whether he truly realized the possibility of the moment. However, you did say 'ordered.' Now that is a stage further in our journey, and the temporal voyage of the Arboretor."

"Temporal." The tourist sucked impatiently at his hollow tooth. "You mean that your Arboretor denies what is called the spirit? The soul?"

"The gentleman in question—let us not mention his name again, for somehow a passing condition of our brain derides repetition—had a feeling that the spirit, or the soul, was a refinement of the brain, conceived only by the brain, and therefore to the brain as brain's child, beyond question. For it is an eternal certainty that the idea of the spirit and the brain has been perceived only through the mechanism of the brain. And the brain, a selfish limb, is adamant in the applause of its own function."

The tourist's brain was offended by this statement.

Through the tourist's eyes it turned to regard the topiarist freshly—and its grey cells paled with sudden doubt. For, in sympathy with his statement, the topiarist had altered. The beak of his cap had grown so long, the black mask beneath so profound. The hemp of his suit and the buttons of his breeches were suddenly evocative of some nightmare nostalgia that lay waiting in the tourist's youth. Eyeless, the figure seemed the more all-seeing. Somehow, with the hemp and the beak and the darkness, the topiarist looked like a ratcatcher, tall, grim, with the untouchable solitary knowledge of a man who does what other men detest. Darkly he stood alone and fingered his shears. The grey cells in the tourist's brain pounded with the terror of doubt. Now he knew that he wanted to escape. Quickly. So he said :

"I understand. But what has all this to do with the maze?"

The topiarist laughed. "You will see."

"I think perhaps . . . the hour . . . my train . . ."

"We have plenty of time," smiled the topiarist, and he began to lead the pounding brain off the mudtrack, through the reedy catafalques, and onto the first slopes of the hill surmounted by the maze.

As they climbed, the topiarist continued, speaking slowly, with definition, expounding, with lasting emphasis, "So the Arboretor saw that men attached too earnest an importance to the fulfilment of their invention and their searching. Mind you, never for a moment did he deny that importance altogether. No, he loved the idea of fulfilment: but he did not idolize it to the detriment of living. Thinking thus, he began to watch the working of these brains, these peculiar limbs—and he noticed one consistent factor. Inside each brain there was a square and a straight line! Always a square and a straight line! Only rarely were there the beginnings of a circle! Always a square and a straight line! Remember this—and you will understand better the significance of the maze."

II

Although the maze had seemed forbidding to the tourist from a distance, this quality of threat receded as they approached, until, when they had arrived almost beneath its shadow, the maze appeared to be an ordinary hedge of yew.

Certainly it was high, higher than a man. Certainly it was dark ; but then the yew leaf, in colour and in the immobile set of its leaves, is naturally brother to the cypress and the urn. Certainly the maze grew suddenly, a still sharp cliff of shadow against the young green of the attendant turf. "I regret that you were frightened," said the topiarist, whose peak seemed now to have shrunk again to its original size. "Normally, you should have lived in the halcyonry for some weeks. Realization would then have been gradual. But you are a tourist, and therefore imagine that you have no time. I made you a concession there."

Together they mounted the wooden steps of a rakish gazebo that overlooked the maze. Finally they emerged onto an upper platform from which for the first time the tourist could survey the panorama, from its clear beginnings to the confused distance of its far horizon.

The maze had no main entrance. In fact, there was no certain entrance at all. Each man who entered cut his own passage with his own pair of shears. Confronted by the penetrable mystery, he moulded his own way. Every man first cut himself a straight path, concise as a plumbline. Later, according to his degree of interest, he turned to the left or right, doubled back on himself, marched in squares, hurried forward, lingered back, clipping assiduously the convolutions of his chosen passage. One factor alone was constant. Each man clipped in straight lines. There were neither curves nor circles. As far as the eye reached, and forever further, men could be seen clipping their squared progress through the huge shrub. And always along the façade there were more men, each choosing a moment and a place of entry, each having climbed the hill from the halcyonry, each provided suddenly with shears, each confronted now with his individual task of penetration. "Come," said the topiarist, taking the tourist's arm and guiding him gently back to the steps, "Now you have some idea of the perspective, you will wish to examine our work in detail. Yes? Meanwhile I'll tell you about the night when the Arboretor listened."

But this time it was difficult to swivel the tourist immediately. For although the tourist yielded slowly with eyes fascinated by the incredible panorama before him, yet his free hand had already darted to his waistcoat pocket. From this

he drew a large watch. As the watch thrust itself forward, just as it began to glint in the twilight—so in proportion the tourist's resistance increased, until finally he turned of his own accord, even attempting to drag the topiarist with him. "I should dearly love to investigate at closer quarters your remarkable work, your truly extraordinary work," he said, stuttering slightly as though pre-occupied with his feet and his coat-tails that flew in front of him towards the steps. "But I really must catch my train. My train leaves almost immediately."

"One night many years ago," said the topiarist, continuing his story quite evenly, "the Arboretor lay down in the halcyonry on an erection of mud, half nest, half bed, and he began to listen for his own brain. There in the dark night, amid the silent rushes and the sleeping birds, this man lay alone and listened for his brain. The birds slept with heads bowed into their puffed chests, eyes half open, so that they appeared more deep in thought than sleeping. No wind stirred the rushes. Above, the stars twinkled a million miles off, yet without sound. In this kind of immeasurable quiet, the Arboretor began to exercise the parts, of his body, one after the other, and soon confirmed that he could feel each separate part perform its special motion. He felt each definite movement, he heard each separate movement in his brain. Then he thought—I can feel my thumb move, I can hear my knee-cap revolve. But often both these parts of me are still. My brain, alone of all my organs, is never still. My brain is the eternally active limb—yet I cannot ever remember hearing it move! The physicians tell me it is made of grey cells, of curling matter. Now, as I think, these cells should surely pump, this matter should expand and retract. An organism that by its nature is always on the go must surely perform a motion that is perceptible! So the Arboretor lay in the dark and listened for the pumping of the cells of his brain.

"Through the night he listened. Once he almost felt a tremor of movement within the bright darkness that lay within his skull. He nearly imagined the point, the dark point, where part of his brain actually touched the interior bone of his skull. But in a second the sensation was lost. And again he strove, listening, listening, every muscle relaxed, every fibre of nerve eased, his eyes turning up behind closed

lids towards the lost recess within him, his ears thrilling to every stealthy possibility. Through the long silence of the night he listened. He never noticed the darkness cool to dawn. But the night's silence was broken abruptly by a sharp clap of thunderous music—the first chord of the dawn, when all the birds sing together. Startled from his reverie, the Arboretor sprang to his feet and from that time forever he was convinced of the brain's limit. The brain could not perceive itself! The Arboretor saw that he perceived all things through his brain: how then could the brain ever perceive itself through itself? There lay its first limit. And if the brain admitted one limit, why not others?

"A year later the maze was planted and the Arboretor was leading the people down from the city to the halcyonry. There they lived for some weeks. From the black mud of that vital necropolis they gazed up at their own live city and were able thus to study their error. Then the Arboretor led them up the hill to the maze. As he went, he explained the ultimate necessity of the maze, of whose purpose the people were almost ignorant."

The tourist's eyes lit with some sort of excited pleasure. He had turned his face to the topiarist's mask, and was gazing up into it with deep interest. But his hand still clutched the watch, and now he both asked a question and confirmed a statement in the same breath, as if he wished to utter both messages at exactly the same time. "Tell me, tell me—what then is the purpose of the maze? . . . I must most certainly catch my train. I cannot remain here a second longer . . ."

They had reached the bottom rung of the gazebo ladder. Without turning his head, nor altering his speed, the topiarist smiled again. "There is plenty of time," he said. And with his free right arm—for he had the tourist grasped firmly in the other—he reached down and unbuckled his shears. "Plenty of time," he repeated, perhaps to the tourist, or the shears, or to the wall of yew that rose darkly above them.

Abruptly the topiarist released his grip on his companion's arm, swung the shears to the front, and started to cut a passage into the thick shrub. The tourist was free! His arm was free! His legs danced wildly! His eyes laughed out towards the station! . . . Then he heard the sound of the

shears. Poised in the very act of flight, his body relaxed. He turned slowly back towards the hedge. The watch sprang back to his pocket. It seemed that he was impelled towards the hedge by a curiosity from which he could never now escape, though just a moment before his will had hastened in precisely the opposite direction. The topiarist clipped without effort, his tall body erect and supple, so that he scarcely seemed to move his arms. It appeared that he was inevitably certain of his passage. The dark yew fell easily. So swiftly did the topiarist clip that he was able to proceed at a leisured walking pace. Soon they had passed into the shadow of the evergreen.

Together they traversed some fifty metres when suddenly the shears changed their tune. The muffled clipping rang suddenly loud and metallic. The shears were cutting on air ! It was plain that they had penetrated some alley already cut. The topiarist quickly silenced the new sound. He bent down to press his face closely against the thin screen of leaves and branches that remained. He indicated silence with a raised forefinger and beckoned the tourist to bend down also.

Through the screen the tourist saw some twenty people slowly clipping an avenue through the yew beyond. They clipped with precision, taking great care that the walls of their avenue were perfectly straight. They appeared just at that time to be engaged upon a right-angled turn. The hedge corner was cut with fine sharp squared exactitude. As they bent to their shears, the people talked. To the tourist, prying through the interlaced leaves, they seemed ordinary people, dressed ordinarily, and of ordinary conversation. All twenty were talking about people of their acquaintance, discussing with relish each foible of their recollection, arguing at length each idiosyncrasy of their subject. Occasionally one or other of them giggled ; sometimes one would whisper a tremendous item of news ; then another would shrug his shoulders with scornful finality, and with a satisfied sigh, mutter " What else would you expect of her ? "

The tourist and the topiarist peered through the hedge for quite a time. They watched the twenty gossipers turn the corner, they waited until, apparently having completed a square, the party returned to view. Clipping and gossiping. Gossiping and clipping. They never paused in their

clipping, they never ceased to chatter. One felt that this procedure continued indefinitely, for all the hours of daylight, into the night, and then afresh the next morning. The tourist shuddered. There was no reason why the people should not combine conversation with their work. That would be normal enough. But somewhere the tourist sensed a connection between the clipping and the conversation, as if each were complementary of the other. Just as he could sense a hopeless void, something emptily perpetual—although for all the tourist really knew the party might at any moment have dropped their shears and made off home. “No, not hopeless,” said the topiarist, smiling softly with his teeth. “Hopeful. Remember, the clipping is voluntary. These people are living with hope. But come,” he added, turning his shears into the shrub again, “you must see some of the others.”

They walked for some time between the high walls of yew. Leaves scattered the freshly cut pathway. Their feet trod into the smiling prepucced berries that winked pinkly in the green. Now the topiarist made no effort to lead his companion. The tourist followed, fearful yet willing, lagging yet curious, driven by strange possibilities, welcoming despite all his formal horror some inviting attitude that was scarcely believable—or had not yet taken shape enough to be believed.

Once more the shears rang as they clipped air, once more the two men bent to survey the alley they had nearly entered. Ten men and two women were clipping carefully the walls of an arbour. The arbour was perfectly rectangular. In the centre stood a square pillar of yew. It was plain that the men were business men. They wore dark suits and high white collars: the women wore pincenez and suits of severe couture. All twelve people talked as they clipped, discussing with each other the trends of the market, the vagaries of the exchange, the formation of trusts that might control trusts that dispensed trusts. “I paid three eighths for the preferred—then unloaded them for lei. Lei bumped up three points the next day,” said the nearest man, who was just then engaged in clipping with meticulous care a small buttress that protruded from the arbour’s wall. Another, who was working at the bottom of the hedge, near the ground, remarked to one of the younger men, “The romance of commerce! That’s what you must see in the figures on your desk. The big steamers,

the spices plucked by languorous hands in some tropical paradise . . .” The young man smiled brightly with absent eyes that saw nothing beyond the figures which had weakened them.

Now the tourist felt the beginnings of panic. Wildly he sucked at his reassuring tooth. For the first time he had noticed that the arbour had neither entrance nor exit! The twelve people were completely hedged in! There seemed no possibility of escape—unless, of course, they were to cut their way out. But despite this possibility, the very sight of twelve persons confined in such a closed green box affected the tourist with a claustrophobia, admittedly indirect, but none the less unpleasant. How he wished to go! His panic rose urgently. He imagined that he still retained the independence of his going and coming. He attributed his presence in the maze to a personal and voluntary mood of curiosity. Nevertheless, before taking to his heels, he grabbed the topiarist by his sleeve and whispered quickly, “Tell me, how did they get there? Will they escape?”

The topiarist pointed to a vertical strip of the wall where the yew showed a lighter green. “See the fresh leaves?” he asked, turning his unseen eyes to the tourist. “That is where they entered. Since then the yew has grown again across their passage. Those people will never retrace their journey, although perhaps they will often cast backward a longing glance. Yes, they will sometimes wish to return: but all they will remember of their path will be brought to them by the illusory green of the fresher shoots—just a vague recollection of their past as they screw up their eyes to follow where the new yew has not yet grown to the height of the older walls. Nevertheless they will return no further than by the measure of their longing.” As he spoke, the topiarist took up his shears and started to cut a new passage forward. “But the function of the maze,” he added, “mitigates any need for these nostalgias.”

The tourist had listened to his words with apprehension. He fingered his collar. He pulled at his watch. Fearfully, he glanced behind him. Yes, the new shoots were already forcing themselves out of the walls that had so recently been cut! The yew grew fast! In some places fresh branches from either side were nearly interlaced! Soon, thought the tourist, the passage by which I have entered will have dis-

appeared ; soon all escape will be improbable ! He pulled wildly at his watch. Around him lay the incomprehensible workings of a new way of life : somewhere in the dry dust at the yewroots and in the attitude of its people he sensed a wisdom and a high standard that opposed directly the essence of his old life. This life was his to adopt—now—if he willed it. But only by the sacrifice of his old ways. He found himself wishing clearly for strength to adopt the topiary : but just as this wish grew clearer, so his love for the old ways loomed larger. It did not recede, as he would have imagined, in relation to his new desire. Instead, both inclinations grew equally to be giants that wrestled within him. Unable to decide, he found himself following the topiarist, stepping uncertainly, looking ever backwards to see that the weaving of the new shoots had not finally straddled his old path.

The topiarist had stopped again. Through the leaves they saw a small group of oldish men preoccupied with the clipping of an intricate pattern. Sometimes one or the other would disappear within this minor labyrinth : only to re-emerge soon, clipping as he came, the sap dripping green blood from his shearblades. These men did not talk so much. "Astronomers and men of science," whispered the topiarist. Then he bent his head to either side, as if listening for some sound that whispered beyond the walls of the alley in which they stood.

The tourist glanced hurriedly at the sky. It was still twilight. The thick walls of leaf were silhouetted, yet still remained green. One or two berries winked pinkly. Suddenly the topiarist began clipping the hedge to either side. He spoke over his shoulder, "An excellent place of vantage. We can see a lot from here . . ." And it seemed that he was cutting a spacious polygon from which they could look out in many directions. As he finished each side, he motioned with his peaked cap for the tourist to look through to the scene beyond. The tourist walked from wall to new wall. Through each new screen he saw an harbour or an alley in which men and women of different categories were either talking or musing—but always clipping. "Artists !" whispered the topiarist of a group who were carefully re-erecting new walls from clippings they had recently sheared. And again—"Cryptologists, astrologers . . ." of a party preoccupied with the combinations of a series of squared pillars. "Spiritualists . . ."

Just then two young verdurers dressed like the topiarist came shearing their way into the polygon. They carried trays slung from their necks. Busily, without glancing at either the topiarist or the tourist, they passed through the opposite wall. There they commenced to brandish the various objects that littered their trays, apparently offering them for sale to the people clipping. The tourist, peering anxiously through the screen, heard them cry, "Dockets? Anyone for dockets today? No? Well, something else? Here's the plumbline you've always wanted! No? Not even a plumbline? Well . . . perhaps a pigeon-hole?" And as they gesticulated, the people crowded round the toys and made their purchases with a great show of excitement. Yet, curiously, as they chattered, they never mentioned the purchases. They talked, though more excitably, of whatever they had previously been discussing. It was as if the act of purchasing was a ritual which could be performed in perfect mime by part of themselves while their real interest remained undiverted.

Again this strange complement of action and thought—but with no intermingling!

The tourist glanced back at the topiarist, then sucked his tooth efficiently to allay a sudden terror. The peak of the topiarist's cap was again growing longer. The shade of his eyes was growing deeper. Above, the twilight had begun to fade. Darkness hovered above them, slowly digesting the dead light. The topiarist raised his long shears and beckoned to the tourist. "Look through this screen, perhaps the last," he said. "This is the final grade our people have yet reached . . ."

As the tourist thrust forward his head, trembling mechanically, like the head of a tortoise, fevered by the imminence of discovery, fearful of choice—he felt the shears cut through his waistcoat, he felt his watch fall to the turf!

From behind the yew a voice spoke. Each word hung on the air enclosed in its individual sphere of inviolable silence. "IT in itself is vague, impalpable. Yet within there is FORM. How profound, how obscure! Yet within it there is a vital principle . . ." And another voice answered:

"It is the form of the formless: the image of the imageless . . ."

* From the Taoist teaching.

The tourist parted the leaves and saw beyond them a small arbour. Three aged men sat on the smooth turf. They were clipping, with the most tranquil technique, a low hedge of calm pattern—in the manner known to verdurers as box parterre. But, the tourist felt, this arbour is different from the others! Here is a distinct variance! But how? He tried to marshal the darting of his veins, he tried to stretch smooth his temple skin and direct the working of his brain. He studied the men. They were ancient, their beards hung long and white. Yet there was no decay in the texture of these men. Their skins were neither crusted nor dry. Their faces were certainly lined, but the flesh bordering each wrinkle was rounded and smoothly polished. These were in no way the disordered markings of senility. The lines curved over the old men's faces in a formal pattern. They were a comment on senility. They ran as decidedly as the pigment tracery on a ceremonial mask: yet thinly and multiplied, subtly inscribed, traced with the light genius of a chinese brush. The words proceeded . . .

“It is a great square with no angles . . .”

Although it was dark, the long bill of the topiarist's cap threw a blacker shadow across the tourist, who was now kneeling with his face pressed into the screen of leaves. Alone in this softer, greater darkness, the tourist felt his first real fear. Previously, he had feared perhaps only the idea of fear, the possibility of fearful atmospheres. But now the presence of each leaf, the sad violet of the sky, the silhouetted hedge-tops, the hidden roots, the wetly furred turf—each was charged with threat. The topiarist, who had grown so much taller, loomed above him. Somewhere behind his eye he felt the glittering of the shears. In the arbour beyond sat the three white old men, shining serenely in the darkness. This was the deepest twilight moment, the Grand Dusk—when the silence roars and the dew can be heard to drop. The tourist held his breath. At some moment now, at any moment, the husk of the secret would split, and the secret would overflow . . .

“Even these wisest men cannot eradicate the brain's old system,” whispered the topiarist, somewhere above. “But, as you see, they alone are attempting the construction of a curved hedge”

So that was the difference! The old men were making a curve!

"But do you see? Do you see how they are setting about it? Look—they are constructing their curve from a numberless series of short straight lines! They have freed themselves of the right angle. But still they are slaves of the straight line—even with their intentions purified."

Grimly the tourist clung back to his old traditions. Deep in his pocket he gripped the key to his door, the locket of his wife, the cube-wrapped sample of his work, the ticket to his old life. These things had been sufficient. He shrunk from discovering the new things he longed for. For the new things would enlighten him. His reason would forever be torn from the peace of the old illusionary habits. He would have to change!

The topiarist was speaking again. "Quite quickly and very roughly, we have walked through some of the people's work. Just as the people work here in the maze—so they used to work in the city across the valley. Many matters conditioned the way they worked. Observing these detachedly, the Arboretor marked that a limitation in their minds conceived only two methods of work. Speaking pictorially, the people loved squares and they loved straight lines. How they enclosed their lives in squared boxes! How they rushed their children into cubes! How they muttered, over and over again, as they hurried from task to task, 'The straight line is the shortest distance from point to point!' The Shortest Distance! The Straight Line! It was a duty whose enchantment never waned. Oh, how these people measured! They were lost in measurements! They patted their strategies and inserted them neatly into pigeon-holes. So neatly that—you could say it without doubt—not a hair-breadth of space was lost! The strategies were packed vacuum-tight! The greatest achievement was the plumbline of generalization. Thrash a matter out, squarely. Get a decision. Compress those multitudinous details into a phrase, four by two! That was the way of generalization. Docket all doubt! Commerce, art, law, ethic, anything—it made no matter what the subject was. Somehow marshal the worrying patterns into a simple, immortal rectangle!

"It was the way of the people's brains. The brain, the little new limb, undeveloped, still at a first moment of its evolution—the brain sized things that way, calculating its food to the measure of its limitations. It had perforce to

work that way—the Arboretor knew that. It would be presumptuous to expect more. It was only healthy for it to work that way, for it was built to work that way. But—and this was the Arboretor's fear—the brain would by its very nature inevitably over-emphasize the importance of its working. It would deliberate in squares, dream on towards greater squares—and consumed only with these intentions, finally by-pass altogether the essence of living.

“So the Arboretor made his condition. While working, the Arboretor proclaimed, the brain must stand aside from itself and survey its work. The brain must not cease to work, but it must learn to smile at its ways, relegate itself to its proportionate importance in the unenumerated scheme of things.

“That was why the Arboretor led the people from the city to the maze. In the maze they exercise purely in the squares they love, but at the same time they are able to see what they do.

“Previously some of the people had attempted this in other ways. Some had lain on cushioned palace roofs and welded their eyes to the passing clouds. Others had tried to immerse their first consciousness in a deadlock with the navel. Some had starved themselves, others had sliced away their genitals and aspired to rise, like aeronauts with their balloons freed of balast, to the clearer skies above. The Arboretor deplored these methods. For, he said, the senses and the brain's first intentions were thus abandoned or diverted. They were wrenched from their natural part. Rightly, they should be not diverted—but absorbed.

“It was the Arboretor's belief that only through an artificial mechanic could the spirit achieve not peace, not happiness, not rest—but a satisfactory freedom, a right place in the chaotic present that is part of a perpetual, thoroughly imperceptible harmony.

“But the mechanic should be such that it absorbs the first senses, uses them, and at the same time discards them to their position in the whole perspective. A mechanic such as the maze.

“Look, tourist! Press your eyes between the leaves and drink in a fine phenomenon!” (For they were on their way again, striding more swiftly than before, whirring through the shrub at a new and urgent speed, the little shorn leaves now milling behind them in a green cloud.)

The tourist saw what he thought were three more of the old men. Three white shapes sat thoughtfully in a circle on the dark turf. The half-light gleamed on their bald heads. But unlike the others—they were not patterning the yew. Instead, each held an instrument. One plucked the strings of a lute. Another strayed his fingers over a formation of chessmen. The third pondered over a sum of figures inscribed upon a mathematical board. Suddenly the tourist realized that these were not old men. They were children.

"The prodigies," said the topiarist, "are at work in this special arbour. Do you see? Children, who somehow have been born with a prescience of abstract pattern! Chess, music, mathematics—these are the only three gifts of the prodigious children. It is never otherwise. Now, tourist, what does this suggest? Why should the pure matter of these brains inherit this extraordinary grasp of abstract pattern? Whence the knowledge? What power has dispensed it?

"How can we tell? Perhaps it is a legacy of all the past. Perhaps the spermcells of a thousand ancestors have added up the sum of their knowledge in those tiny, enormous brains. No, we cannot be sure how the knowledge was transmitted. But its fact suggests to us an idea. The idea that a pattern, a balance and a harmony, do fundamentally, universally, perpetually exist. That these great perceptibles are not the delusions of our daily minds! They are! There is balance, there is an eternal complement. A tree, flowering its wild intricacy of leaves, with no apparent direction, with no intended design—nevertheless emerges wholly balanced. The turn of each leaf, the vagary of each wild twig, the journey of each great branch begins chaotically yet finally takes its part inseparably in the complete pattern.

"And the brain—the little brain—tries to solve this! The brain is not content with the pleasant company of great pattern! No, it presumes, the little brain, to analyse and docket the mystery, applying its own insignificant limits! Why, tourist, should reason presume to bridge the abyss between the earthly and the moving essence? How can it think to impose its ridiculous conceptions of beginning and end to this essential non-form?

"Even the wiser people, the old ones who attempt a curve, speak of their discovery as 'a great square with no angles!'

These men approach understanding—still it is apparent that they assume the possibility of a square, though negatively, from the very choice of their words.

“Surrounded with the lozenges, the sacs, the conches, the dischord shapes of nature, it is phenomenal that the people should still mould their plastic creations in the grim rectangle and in the myth of the round wheel. Yet their own bodies, if they look down, are composed from shapes with no symmetry. Nevertheless, with this evidence not only before their eyes but in them, they gasp for the illusionary finite.

“No, tourist, rather let the people delight in the sense of mystery than its solution. That is the real aesthetic, the true satisfaction of living. Cast off the earnest of importance. Accept the role of the twig, incoherent in itself, only significant as part of the whole. Accept your temporal chaos and love it. Love it as a thing without form, yet know gratefully that a timeless pattern is nevertheless fulfilled. All things are different, yet all things are equal. Laugh away the millenium cult, welcome the sweets of disorder.

“Yet never cease to live every precious fraction of the moment. Taste everything. Keep on trying to build. The search of the square must continue. It is valuable as effort. But synchronize the search with a smiling cathartic. Remain aware of your perspective.

“The Arboretor despised values of the absolute. He revered only the hymns of degree and extent.”

The last words sang out high over the tremendous maze. The topiarist towered up into the twilight sky. His huge shape stood silhouetted like a giant monument against the pervading violet glow. The tourist knelt humbly, a speck at his feet. The shears were dangling above his head.

Then—everything moved! The giant topiarist shrivelled to the size of a fly! He whirled up again to his full height. Again he shrivelled! Again he was great! And all the while he laughed. Flysize, he roared with deep laughter. “Ho, ho! Great or small? Does it matter? Am I the same? Topiarist, fly! Fly, topiarist! The delusion, tourist! See it? Then get off your knees and live!”

The giant shadow swelled finally to the skies. Now the figure was greater than ever before. So huge, so terrifying, that terror became pleasurable. This was the ultimate time when pleasure and pain, love and hate, loss and gain, were

all one. With a last suck at his hollow tooth, the tourist arose from his knees. The topiarist beckoned and started to walk forward. The tourist dragged his old emblems from his pocket ; key, ticket, sample and locket went whirling away behind him as he strode freely forward in the path of the increasing and diminishing giant.

"Come," said the topiarist. "We have plenty of time. And as we walk, I shall tell you a story. Once there was a tourist and a topiarist"

THE WITNESSES

WE, the witnesses, were of course present throughout the episode, although it would be difficult ever to determine whether what we saw was the final truth or indeed if we viewed the matter in its right perspective at all, for at the time there was a great deal of smoke blurring the air ; and certain other factors might have confused us too.

Imagine a patch of marshland in the mist. The blackish earth smokes out its white vapour, there are little mounds where the mist appears to gather in greater density, there are pockets and sloping hollows that sometimes emerge clearly—providing suddenly an ephemeral vista of some few yards—and then as quickly disappear as the white wet fog seeps and drifts all about them. Sometimes the fog hangs immobile, like a terrible pale blindness, and sometimes it wreathes and eddies. Then it has the motion of some slow-moving monster, a caterpillar, waving its head vaguely in search of the food it will so inevitably, so casually swallow.

But in this case the marsh has no surface of black peat—it is a waste land of badsmelling coffee beans. Coffee beans have poured from their burst sacks and now lie silted in thick mounds for hundreds of feet around. They have been burning, for there has been a fire, and the warehouse that once enclosed them has collapsed many hours ago. So that a few bricks and strange promontories of broken masonry emerge at intervals from the brown swamp of steaming beans.

Firemen have quenched the first fury of the fire, but there are still moments of danger ahead. For within the brownish-purple mounds and dunes there still lie muffled nests of fire, deep and unpredictable, smouldering fiercely, corroding upwards as their hidden heat germinates, multiplying themselves in their effort to erupt a combustive exit. Upon these dangerous mounds firemen still pour a ceaseless stream of water. As the water drenches down, a mist of steam rises and, mixing with the smoke, fogs the air thickly.

Above this swamp a fireman seems to float in mid-mist. If you had stood below and looked up, you would have thought he was actually riding the steam, really straddling with the grip of his oilskinned knees the white cloud itself!

But this is the illusion of steam and smoke, for he really sits astride a broken wall obscured by the white veil of mist. As the mist drifts, you may see a part of the wall. It is some twenty feet high, so that the fireman sits on a precarious seat: he directs the jet from his hose downwards onto the beans, circling here and there as the smoke guides him toward patches of internal fire. The hose is heavy, the water-pressure as much as he can hold. So that if something were to slip, the fireman would certainly be thrown off the wall and down into the terrible boiling beans: or he might break his head against some angular rock of masonry. Thus he is careful to keep the ridge of wall well gripped between his legs.

We watched those thick-booted legs of his as he leaned forward. We knew well that he forced his body forward because the hose and its live recoil constantly dragged him back. He leant forward, in a sense resting on the firm hose, yet while he rested he had to push as well, for his weight alone could not control that pressure. The insides of his knees were aching as they bruised themselves slowly against the hard brick. Although he was scarcely able to move the position of his body on that constricted wall—occasionally he had to ease his pressed flesh and tired muscles: for the strain of two or three hours in such a cramped position is tremendous. It calls for no quick exertion, no leap of prowess, but it is like carrying a heavy trunk, when your muscles accumulate their torture with the strain of each added minute, when hard corners bite into your flesh, when out of breath you drop the trunk heavily on a landing, determined to stretch and rest your cramped body before continuing up the next

flight of stairs. But high up on the wall you cannot rest. The fireman must bear the torture of his trunk for hours, not minutes ; if he relaxes, even for a second, the hose will likely whip out of his hands and sweep him off the wall with a single quick twist of its violent water pressure. So the fireman eases his seat only slightly, grits his teeth, and presses.

Thus on this occasion that particular fireman sat high up in the steam and watched his feathering jet of water soak into the brown mess beneath. Water trickled over his hands from a leaky joint in the brass nozzle. The water was ice-cold : his hands were blue and burning with cold. Once he looked down to a patch of clear pavement just beneath the wall, where the pump that served him was at work. The pump operator was bending over his controls. The fireman called down to him—it was some sort of greeting that he called—but the operator never looked up. Not feeling so sociable, thought the fireman. Or he is still grumbling at me over . . . ? The fireman thought of a row they had had earlier that afternoon.

The soaked mash of beans smelt thickly of something like wet sacking. It was a dead smell ; it seemed to clog the air. The fireman screwed up his nostrils in disgust. He coughed as a thicker drift of smoke whipped his lungs. Then, painfully, he eased his seat on the hard brick. This is most comfortable, he grunted, isn't it ? He shifted the beam of water over to a streak of smoke that showed blue against the whitish steam. He settled down to wait again, and, with only the automatic task in his hands, his mind began to dream. He thought suddenly : Here I am, high up on the wall, riding above everybody, like a rich man in his car ! How fine it is to lie back on the cushions, and look through the warm, solid glass at the cold world that hurries along the street outside. I am shaved and my fingers are clean : I am free from the sweat of walking and the grime of busrails. I can lie back and think at my leisure. None of the minor mechanics of movement to disturb me, I am transported. Why, I can even continue to construct the affairs of business that have bought me this freedom from interruption, so that as I lie back I am at the same time insuring myself against all interruptions and irritations of the future. The position is perpetual and unassailable.

The hose stiffened slightly. The pump operator must have

increased the water pressure. Then it slackened to its previous strength. Tricky, thought the fireman, he'll throw me off the wall if he does that too much. His thoughts returned to the limousine ; but distracted from their original plane they began to consider the rich man more detachedly. Of course, thought the fireman, you can't blame them for wanting to keep away from the bustle. They've got to keep their minds clear in that sort of job. The more leisure for consideration, the greater their efficiency. Yet—perhaps if they took their part in the scramble for the tube and in the bus queue in the rain—well, they'd get to know their fellow men better : what they think is sacrificed in efficiency might be compensated by a greater knowledge of people, a love for the masses their industries serve, in fact an efficiency of living.

But perhaps the rich man would never grow to love his people. Perhaps they would just irritate him, so that he might direct his industry finally against them. No, better the limousine and the distance—let him see them from a distance and love them if he is man enough. Or again, does the distance most usually engender nothing more than a barrier of unfamiliarity ? We mistrust the unfamiliar, we fear it, and that is hate.

Hate. The fireman looked down at the pump operator and remembered the row they had had that afternoon. He thought, I wonder if he hates me ? He watched the dim figure stooping over the pump controls, peering at the gauges in the yellow light of his torch. A curious fellow, keeps himself to himself, hardly says a word—yet he opened out well and truly this afternoon. Could I help it if the girl happened to be his sister ? Yes, a quiet chap—but in a way not naturally quiet. More as though he were always compressing some terrific energy that boiled to get out of him. I don't like the way his brows devil together—that's said to be a dangerous sign.

Suddenly the fireman was thinking of a barber's chair. He had a fad about barbers' chairs. He would never let a barber shave him, for instance. He imagined that perhaps, with the soft temptation of his naked neck, with the keen razor poised in the barber's hand, with some deep weariness of life ticking away in the barber's head—that the barber's mind might snap and he would flick the razor deep into the tender throat already clutched so firmly

in his hand! The fireman shivered. Then, even on the hard brick, his spine stiffened and he sat bolt upright. Perhaps that would happen with the pump man! Perhaps there were years of suppressed feeling growling within his head like the poison of a tumour—a tumour that was being forced to a point that very moment by a sharp hatred of the man who had invaded his sister! So that this was the moment, the blinding moment of noise and fierce light, when the tumour would rip itself open! The fireman knew well that the pump operator could murder him. With a little dive of his forefinger he could press down the throttle so that a powerful gust of water would whip through the hose, lifting him clean off the wall, throwing him high in the air above the burning mess below. He shuddered and glanced down in dread at the man beneath him. Then he checked the wildness of his thinking with a short laugh. Such things didn't happen, not really. But, although he was laughing at himself, he scarcely moved his head to look down. Beneath his laughter he was afraid of what he might see.

Suddenly the night flared up. A brilliant red glare flooded through the mist and the smoke. Everything flashed into being. Light evaporated the mist, so that each corner of the architecture, each detail of the pump, each line of the operator's uniform leapt into abrupt definition, like objects switched suddenly onto a screen. We learnt afterwards that an oil tank had been ignited somewhere across the road. The fireman was looking straight at the pump operator. The operator turned his face upwards as the light came. Every feature could be distinguished. As they stared into each other's faces, a lump of fear choked the fireman's throat. For the operator was smiling! Beneath the dark V of his brows the eyes glittered with furious amusement, the lips drew back on teeth half-opened in a yellow snarl of delight. Have you ever seen a dog laugh? It was like that. Humorous yet malevolent, a puppet of a laugh, the mouthing of a lunatic child over fangs that were made to bite.

In that malicious instant of blinding light, the fireman saw three things. This terrible smile, beneath it the man's hand covering his murderous throttle lever, and beyond and all around the scalding mass of beans. He thought suddenly of the parade ground, where once he had seen three heavy men holding the nozzle end of a charged line of hose. Some-

one back at the pump had accelerated the water pressure. Very slowly the men had been lifted from their feet as the hose stiffened and recoiled. The men had hung there, stupidly, up in the air, three heavy men powerless to weigh down the slim white hose.

Before every great catastrophe there is said to be a pause, a terrible imagined silence. Threatened men for the first time in their lives become aware of certainty. The quicksilver sets, time freezes solid. Always before at every crisis, there has somewhere appeared an alternative of escape. But now, even as their minds wildly search for a way out, they are sure in their souls that at last there is none. The hypnosis is absolute. Each muscle freezes, not so much with dread as with knowledge. And then, in the least part of the last second, the will to movement reasserts itself. In any direction—they will run, strike, jump. It is the final act of survival. Hearing the bomb whistle down from above, the audience in a theatre, with no room to throw themselves to the ground, rise to their feet, as though an anthem were being played. A sailor jumps from his boat before it strikes the rock. Just as—before the pressure reached him, the fireman threw himself from the wall. He flung the hose away from him, and, swinging his leg over, just as if he were dismounting from a horse, he left the wall and dived down into the boiling beans.

That was what happened. But to this day we cannot be sure that the pressure ever really increased. We never saw the pump operator's hand move the throttle. Perhaps the fireman never really saw the smile, perhaps the smile never existed? It is quite possible, after all, that it was nothing more than an expression of fear at the sudden bright glare. That is possible! A moment's fear transformed into a smile of hatred only by the fireman's brain, the unreliable agent that informed us, the witnesses, his eyes.

THE LONG SHEET

HAVE you ever wrung dry a wet cloth? Wrung it bone white dry—with only the grip of your fingers and the muscles of your arms? If you have done this, you will understand

better the situation of the captives at Device Z when the warders set them the task of the long sheet.

You will remember how, having stretched the cloth between your hands, you begin by twisting one end—holding the other firm so that the water is corkscrewed from its hiding place. At first the water spurts out easily. But later you will find yourself screwing with both hands in different directions, whitening your knuckles, straining every fibre of your diaphragm—and all to extract the smallest drop of moisture ! The muscle of your arm swells like an egg—yet the wet drop remains a pinhead ! As you work the cloth will gradually change from a grey colour to the whiteness of dried bone. Yet even then the cloth will be wet ! Still you will knot your muscles ; still you will wrench away at the furtive damp. Then—at last !—you will believe the cloth to be dry . . . but in the next second the tip of a finger will quiver tragically as it touches some cold, hidden veil of damp clinging deep down in the interlaced threads.

Such, then, was the task of the captives.

They were placed in a long steel box of a room with no windows and no doors. The room was some six feet wide and six feet high ; but it ran one hundred feet in length. It resembled thus a rectangular tunnel with no entrance and no exit. Yet the sensation inside was not really that of a tunnel. For instance, a quantity of light flowed through thick glass panels set at intervals along the ceiling. These were the skylights, and through these the captives had been dropped into the box. Again, the impression of living in a tunnel was offset by a system of cubicle walls that separated the captives into groups. These cubicle walls were made from the same riveted steel as the main walls : there was no communication from cubicle to cubicle except through a half foot of space left between the top of the wall and the ceiling. Thus each group of captives occupied, as it were, a small room. There were twenty-two captives. They were grouped in unequal number within four cubicles.

Through the entire length of this system, raised three feet from the ground, passing through the very centre of each room, ran a long wound sheet. It was made from coarse white linen bundled into a loose cylinder of cloth some six inches in diameter.

When the captives were first thrown into their cubicles,

the long sheet was heavy with water. The warders had soaked the material so thoroughly that in the folds the water had gathered into lakes. The warders then issued their instructions. The captives were to wring the sheet dry. It would not do to wring the sheet to what we would normally call a "dry" state—as of clothes ready for airing. On the contrary—this sheet must be purged of *every* moisture. It must be wrung as dry as a bone. This, the warders concluded, might take a long time. It might even take months of hard work. In fact, they had taken special care to treat the linen so that it would be durable over a lengthy period. But when the task was finally completed, then the men and women would be granted their freedom. They would be released.

As the grave faces of the warders disappeared and the glass skylights slid shut, the captives smiled for the first time. For months they had lived with the fear of death, they had shrunk in ceaseless apprehension of the terrible devices that awaited them. And now that future had devolved into the wringing of a simple sheet! A long sheet, it was true. But child's play in comparison with what they had expected. Thus they sank to the steel floor in relief. Few laid a hand on the sheet that day.

But after three months the captives began to realize the true extent of their task. By this time each group in each cubicle had wrung the worst water from their section of the sheet. Yet with all their sweating and straining they could not rid the cloth of its last dampness.

It was apparent that the warders had no intention of presenting them with a simple task. For, through vents near the roof, hot steam was injected mechanically into the cubicles as long as daylight lasted. This steam naturally moistened the sheet afresh. The steam was so regulated that it hindered rather than prevented the fulfilment of the wringing. Thus there was always less steam entering than moisture wrung from the sheet at a normal rate of working. The steam injection merely meant that for every ten drops of water wrung seven new drops would settle upon the sheet. So that eventually the captives would still be able to wring the sheet dry. This device of the warders was introduced solely to complicate the task. It seemed that the warders were acting in two ways. Daily they encouraged the efforts

of the captives with promises of release ; but daily they turned on the steam cocks.

In the cubicles the air was thick with steam. It was the air of a laundry, where steam catches in the throat, where it is sometimes difficult to breathe, where the smell of hot, wet cloth sickens the heart. The steel walls sweated. Condensed water trickled in winding trails down the grey plate. Beads of moisture clustered at the rivet heads. The long sheet spattered a few drops into the central gutter in the floor as the captives twisted against time. Both men and women worked half naked. Since the sheet was positioned three feet from the ground they were forced to stoop. If they sat at their work, then their arms grew numb in the raised attitude at which they had to be maintained. There was nothing for it but to stoop. In the hot air they sweated. Yet they dared not lean over the sheet for fear their sweat should fall on the hungry cloth. Their muscles knotted, their backs cried out as they twisted. The end was far. But there was an end. That meant that there was hope. This knowledge lent fire to the struggling ambition that lived in their human hearts. They worked.

Yet some were not always equal to the task.

ROOM THREE—THOSE WHO SOUGHT OUTSIDE

There were four rooms. Take Room Three. This housed five people—two married couples and a young serbian grocer. All five of them wanted freedom. They worked earnestly at their task. That the task was in essence unproductive did not worry them. At least, it would produce their freedom. It was thus artificially productive. These five people set about the problem in a normal businesslike way. Previously, they had been used to habitual hours, a life of steady formula. This they now applied to the new business of wringing. Set hours were allotted to each person. It was as if they commuted regularly from their suburbia (the steel sleeping corner) to the office (the long sheet). They worked in relays, in four hour stretches throughout the day and night.

However, as I have said, they were not equal to the task. The framework of habit overcame them. Like so many who live within a steady, comfortable routine, they allowed the routine around the work to predominate in importance above the work itself. They arrived at the long sheet punctually,

and with consciences thus satisfied they put insufficient effort into the actual work. Furthermore, when they had fulfilled the routine assiduously for a period, one or the other would congratulate his conscience and really believe that he deserved a "little relaxation." And he would take the afternoon off. Such was the force of his emphasis on obedience to the letter that he was convinced the law would not suffer. Thus the real work of wringing suffered. New moisture crept in where his hands were weak. These people had set about the quest for freedom in the right way, but they were unhappily convinced of their righteousness.

Sometimes one or other of the couples would lie down together on the sweating steel plates. They would make love as the steam misted their bodies with false perspirations. One of the women became pregnant. Her child was born in the steam box. But, under the influence of Room Three's routine, that child could never be free. The influence, the constriction and the hopeless task of the parents would keep the child in the steam box for life. The child would never have the chance to learn to wring with effect.

ROOM TWO—THOSE WHO SOUGHT IN AND OUT AND AROUND

In another of the rooms—Room Two—there were five men. Their names and their professions do not matter. It is how they attacked the long sheet that matters. They attacked it in five different ways.

Here were five individualists, five who were forced by the set of their minds to approach their problems in various ways of their own. Day after day they laboured in the hot, damp steel cubicle, each twisting the long cylinder of cloth with different reasonings.

One man had been frightened by a sheet when he was young. On some indefinite day of his childhood, a new nurse had appeared. Her black eyes had burned with a powerful scorn; her small lascivious teeth and huge drooping cheeks had threatened him in the candlelight. On her first day the new nurse had made a little white monster from a white sheet. It had two heads and a shapeless, flowing body. The little heads were sharp, and always bobbing. The nurse had come silently into the night nursery when it was dark. Lighting a candle on the floor behind the end of the bed, she had quietly raised her little white monster so

that the boy could just see it above his toes. Then she had begun a strident sing-song crowing, like the harsh crowing of Punch. The boy had awoken to this sound, and had seen the sharp bobbing heads of the little monster.

Now, some thirty years later, the man has forgotten the scene. But somehow his hands cannot touch the long sheet without a great sensation of uneasiness. His hands do not touch the white cloth well. Consequently, he is forever making excuses to avoid working on the sheet. He feigns illness. He offers to clear up the excrement of all the others. He has mutilated his hands. He has attempted to make love with the other four men to avoid the reality of the sheet. Oh, there is no end to the devices the fellow has invented from his sadness! But whatever he does cannot eradicate the awful uneasiness that clouds the far reaches of his mind. At the moment of writing, this man is still in the steel cubicle. He will never be free.

Another of the men in Room Two was a simple quiet fellow. The others took no interest in him. He was too simple a fellow. Yet a most amazing thing—his section of the sheet was white and quite dry! There was a good reason for this. Without any conscious knowledge, without planning and scheming, he had naturally gone at his wringing the good way. He was accustomed to wring sitting astride the cloth. In this position, his legs squeezed at the cloth too. Thus, without questioning, he surrendered his *whole* body to the task. His heart, too; for he was such a simple fellow. This man's sheet was dry. But the others never even noticed. He was such a simple fellow.

There was one man in Room Two whose *métier* in life had always been the short cut. As previously in business, in love, in all relationships, he attempted to apply the short cut system to the most important task of all—the wringing of the long sheet. He tried out a great many tricks and petty deceptions. He blocked up the pipe through which the guards pumped the steam. The next morning, like a mushroom, another pipe had grown at the side of the first. He tried feigning madness. The warders threw buckets of cold water down through the skylight. Some of this water splashed on to the sheet, destroying a whole month's work. The other men nearly killed him for this. Once he bribed one of the warders to send him a pot of white enamel. With this he

painted the sheet white. The enamel dried hard. The sheet seemed dry! But the next day the warders came to chip the enamel off. They punished him with a travelling hose-jet. This jet travelled inconsequentially about the room. To save the water hitting the sheet, the man had to intercept the jet with his body. He was kept running and jumping and squatting for a whole day—until towards evening he dropped exhausted and rolled into the central gutter. The warders, of course, can never be bribed.

Then there was another man who can best be described as a fumbler. He worked hard and earnestly. He was up at the wringing well before the others, he seldom lay down till long after the skylights were dark and the air cleared of steam. But he fumbled. His mind co-ordinated imperfectly with his body. Although he felt that he concentrated his whole effort, psychic and physical, on the job of wringing—his mind would wander to other things. He never knew that this happened. But his hands did. They stopped wringing, they wrung the wrong way—and the fatal drops of moisture accumulated. He could never understand this. He thought his mind was always on the job. But instead his mind settled too often on matters only near to the job, not the job in essence. For a small instance—his mind might wander to the muscle on his left forearm. He might see that it bulges at a downward screw of the wet linen. He watches this bulge as he works. The bulge then absorbs his interest to such an extent that he makes greater play with this left arm to stimulate further the bulge of muscle. In compensation the right arm slackens its effort. The wringing becomes uneven and inefficient. Yet all this time he himself in honesty believes that he is concentrating upon his job. The muscle is, in fact, part of the job. Yet it is only a facet, not the full perspective. He fumbles because he does not see clearly: and to wring dry the long sheet a man must give his whole thought in calm and complete clarity.

The fifth man in Room Two was a good worker. That is, he had found the way to wring effectively; and at times his portion of the sheet was almost dry. But he was perverted. This man liked to wring the sheet almost dry—then stand by and watch the steam settle into the folds once more! He liked to watch the fruits of his labour rot. In this way he freed himself from the task. He freed himself by attaining

his object, and then treating it with the scorn he imagined it deserved. He felt himself master of the work—but in reality he never became the master of his true freedom. There was no purity in this man. His freedom was false.

ROOM FOUR—THOSE WHO NEVER SOUGHT AT ALL

Room Number Four housed more captives than the others. Seven people were crowded into this one cell of steam and steel. There were three women, one girl of twelve, and three men. These people seldom did much work. They were a source of great disappointment to the warders. To these people the effort was not worth eventual freedom. The immensity of the task had long ago disheartened them. Their minds were not big enough to envisage the better future. They had enough. They had their breeding and their food. The state of life held no interest for them. Vaguely, they would have preferred better conditions. But at the cost of toil and thought—no. These people were squalid and small. Their desire for freedom had been killed by a dull acceptance of their impotence. This also became true of the little girl of twelve. She had no alternative but to follow the others.

The warders never played their favourite trick on Room Four. For the simple reason that the trick would have had no effect. The trick was to release into the cells small squadrons of saturated birds. The birds flew into the cells and scattered water from their wings everywhere. The birds flew in all directions and the captives ran wildly here and there in hysterical efforts to trap them before they splashed water onto the sacred sheet. The warders considered that the element of chance implicit in these birds was a healthy innovation. Otherwise, life for the captives would have been too ordered. There must be risk, said the warders. And so from time to time, with no warning, they injected these little wet birds and captives hastened to protect the purity of their work against the interference of fate. If they could not catch the birds in time, they learnt in this manner how to accept misfortune: and in patience they redoubled their efforts to retrieve the former level of their work.

But into Room Four the birds never flew. The trick would never have affected the inhabitants, who lived at the low ebb of misfortune already. Perhaps the real tragedy of these dispirited people was not their own misfortune, to which they

had grown accustomed, but that their slackness had its effect on those whose ambitions were pure and strong. The slackness was contagious. In this way. The sheet was so wet in Room Four that the water seeped through into Room One. And in Room One lived the most successful of all the captives.

ROOM ONE—THOSE WHO SOUGHT INSIDE

There were five of them in cubicle One. Four men and one woman. They were successful no more for their method of wringing than for their attitude towards wringing. At first, when they had been dropped through the skylight, when they saw the long sheet, when they slowly accustomed themselves to the idea of what lay before them, they were profoundly shocked. Unlike the others, they thought death preferable to such senseless and unproductive labour. But they were good people. Soon they saw beyond the apparent drudgery. Soon they had passed through and rejected the various phases experienced and retained by the other rooms. They had known the defeat of Room Four, the individual terrors and escapes of Room Two, the veneer of virtue beneath which the inhabitants of Room Three purred with such alarming satisfaction. No, it was not so very long before these good people saw beyond the apparent and thenceforth set themselves to work with body and soul, gently but with strength, humbly yet fearlessly, towards the only end of value—freedom.

First, these people said "Unproductive? The long sheet a senseless drudgery? Yes—but why not? In whatever other sphere of labour could we ever have produced ultimately anything? It is not the production that counts, but the life lived in the spirit during production. Production, the tightening of the muscles, the weaving of the hands, the pouring forth of shaped materials—this is only an employment for the nervous body, the dying legacy of the hunter's will to movement. Let the hands weave, but at the same time let the spirit search. Give the long sheet its rightful place—and concentrate on a better understanding of the freedom that is our real object."

At the same time, they saw to it that the sheet was wrung efficiently. They arranged a successful rota system. They tried various methods and positions with their hands. Exam-

ining every detail, they selected in every way the best approach. They did not overtax themselves. They did not hurry themselves. They worked with a rhythmic resilience, conserving this energy for the exertion of that. They allowed no extremes. They applied themselves with sincerity and a good will.

Above all they had faith. Their attitude was broad—but led in one direction. Their endeavour was freedom. They feared neither work nor weakness. These things did not exist for them: their existence was a material through which they could achieve, by calm and sensitive understanding, the goal of perfect freedom.

Gradually these people achieved their end. In spite of the steam, in spite of the saturated birds, in spite of the waterous contagion seeping through from the room of the defeated, in spite of the long hours and the heat and the squared horizon of rusting steel—their spirit prevailed and they achieved the purity they sought. One day, seven years later, the wet grey sheet dawned a bright white—dry as desert ivory, dry as marble dust.

They called up through the skylight to the warders. The grave faces appeared. Coldly the warders regarded the white sheet. There were nods of approbation.

“Freedom?” said the captives.

The guards brought out their great hoses and doused the white sheet sodden grey with a huge pressure of water.

“You already have it,” they answered. “Freedom lies in an attitude of the spirit. There is no other freedom.” And the skylights silently closed.

PANSOVIC AND THE SPIDERS

To understand fully the causes that led to the extraordinary death of General Pansovic, one must study certain sections of his journal. Study them, and assume the rest. I have made my own assumptions, which are detailed below. Naturally, I am obsessed with the case. For it was I who found the

General, throttled by his own tent, his head protruding from the white canvas like the head of an Aunt Sally, the amazing bandages wound over every trace of his flesh, even to the eyes.

Here, then, are the four pertinent extracts from Pansovic's life-long journal. The tale begins long ago.

3rd August, 1853. Awoke this morning with a sick head again. Not sick alone from the evening's wine—but sick all inside me of Vienna itself. Sick of the waltzes, tired of the women, bored by the laughter of my brother officers. Sick of the jangling, sick of the frillery, sick of the whole senseless parade. What was once gallant, seems bumptious: what once I thought the joy of life—just high-spirited sloth. Lying in bed, I could see my uniform slung over the chair. Once I adored the smooth chocolate trousers with their fine red stripe, the white dolman that swung so nobly as I walked before the mirror. The high red collar and the bars of braid were once my ambition, a childhood's dream now realized. I was wild then for the tradition and the glory. Now I am only sick with the intolerable ennui of such things. For the white dolman has proved but an end in itself: there is nothing more to it than that. It is a dolman—and thus can be experienced only once.

I feel that if ever again I hear Rudolf order wine for the orchestra, I shall shoot him. And if Franzi, with those abominable dimples, dares once more to jump up on my supper table—I shall certainly shoot her.

Resolve—to visit Balaton for a week's rest. They can't be waltzing on the magyar water.

August 4th. If it is not Strauss, then it is the tzigane. Even on the remote shore of this great flat lake one hears the tzigane fiddle scraping from some tavern in the reeds with the insistence of a cicada. Balaton must be the most monotonous of all lakes in the world. A long inland water with neither the charm of flat lands around it, nor the framing of a mountainside. Here there are both reeds and hills—grass images of mountains—the middle choice. Even the water seems above all watery, with neither black depth nor salt. It is indeed the middle lake, the middling thing, as it is the centre-most lake of the continent. Only at one hour every day does this flat water redeem itself. At the hour of sunset the waters drink in the colours of the setting sun and reflect what they

have digested with a fine lucent richness, like the lustre of food in the stomach of a transparent fish.

Obtained leave with ease. I told them that—since my first name was Estoban, I felt impelled by faith to attend the festival of St. Stephen's day in Budapest. The phenomenon of a czech, with a spanish first name, and a commission in the austrian cavalry, claiming special leave for a hungarian feast day on grounds faintly catholic was more than enough for my orthodox lutheran colonel. Avoiding an argument which threatened his reason, the old man of action took the easiest course of an immediate affirmative. No doubt he slaked his doubts with an inward self-congratulation on his leniency. I have brought Francesca with me.

8 p.m. It has happened again. Even now, hours later, I still tremble as I recollect this. Nevertheless, I must attempt to record my feelings as rationally as is possible under the circumstances.

Francesca and I were sitting on the terrace of the hotel, which stands at the lake's edge. We had scarcely examined the hotel. We were thirsty after the coach drive ; we had walked straight through to the terrace among the lakeside trees—there to take a light wine and enjoy the repose of the evening scene.

Above us and around us stretched a wooden trellis work that supported a thick growth of creeper. Above this first cool ceiling stretched a further canopy of trees. Thus we were surrounded above and on all sides by greenery : except for the open view before us, a vista of the water framed squarely by leaves so that its aspect was theatrical. A vast stage with the distant sky for a dropcloth. The green ceiling above us was hung with small lanterns. Presently, as we were talking, I glanced up at one of these lanterns.

At first I found myself wondering with half an eye why the lanterns seemed so misted. Then, as suddenly I recognized the reason, my whole attention focussed urgently on the light above. For each lantern was misted by a thick veil of hanging web. In the vaporous webs were small balls of fur. Spiders !

I gripped the table to steady my tilted chair. My feet throbbed, my palms moistened with quick sweat. I was hollow with an hysterical vertigo. It was hardly physical fear. This was great disgust that both revolted and attracted.

The whole roof above me was infested with hanging spiders.

Women scream hysterically when a mouse skims across the floor. Some people, fingering a razor, feel that they wish to slit the keen blade across their eyeballs. Others are paralysed at the footless glide of a snake. In each case, the fear is unselfconscious. Reaction is immediate, a reflex, and quite beyond the person. No fear of being afraid can control this vital terror. It is more a paralysis, a vertigo, than what we normally call "fear"; it is the wild disgust of the man on a high tower who must force himself to the precipitous balustrade that overlooks his terror.

For me this terror lies in the movement of spiders.

Stammering, I excused myself from Francesca and walked across the terrace to the hotel. I remember stepping gingerly, with fingers tight-gripped. I walked softly, so that no noise could disturb those that hung above. I hunched my collar up to my bent head, so that none would drop onto my neck. As I stepped from under the trellis I began to run.

By the time I had reached the hotel door, my fear had quietened. I ordered a glass of wine. Casually, I asked the waiter how there were so many spiders in these parts? The man smiled. "Oh, them," he said, in a voice that divested the spiders instantly of all importance. "I don't know, they say it's the water. Blown in on the shorewind. Excuse me—how do you find the wine? Tokay from the estates on the Badacson hills, just over . . ."

There! The man had quite calmly dismissed the question! Had this peasant no sensibilities? Could he not feel? With the sweat on my collar, his indifference shocked me. However, later I saw the matter in more perspective. The waiter had acted normally. It was I who had developed a queer abnormal fear of my own. How then?

I ran upstairs to my room. Cautiously, I opened the door. My temples throbbed so that the only organism of my being was a head. My body had disappeared. I was simply a head, a large head. That is the way a concentration of fear affects me. Cautiously I opened the door . . . and raised my eyes to the ceiling.

It was studded with greyish dots. Some were moving slowly across the cream expanse, others hung down on threads, others waited quietly in corners, rigid as death.

Within an hour I had left Balaton. What Franzi will think, I don't know. I am six foot tall—how could I explain?

5th August, 1853. Can it be that one small fear poisons the whole character of a man? If he is afraid of heights—does the feeling of this fear remain always latent within him, divested of its particular meaning, except that it is fear? And then does this fear beneath the consciousness rock the man's sureness of himself, unseat his male certainty? With fear there can be no faith. Perhaps the smallest fear is enough to undermine all faith.

This morning I was called to Colonel Traubner's office. Instead of marching straight in, as usual—I hesitated outside the door. My heart thumped, and I felt a droop in my shoulders, as though my chest had shrunk suddenly narrow. Inside, as the Colonel talked, I deliberately avoided his eyes. Sometimes I forced myself to look at him, but as soon as I met his gaze I forgot the meaning of the words he spoke and sensed only the terrible possibility that at any moment his eyes might criticize me. I fingered the corner of his desk, then quickly withdrew that alien hand from fear he was watching. Every posture, every limb of my body seemed separately prominent and awkward.

The Colonel is a kind man and a close friend. I have never before been ill at ease in his company. Why today?

And why, later, in the café, was I silent and awkward with Fritz and Carl and Melanie?

I have a curious recollection of a day in very early childhood. The scene is vivid at its climax, but evolves from misted beginnings, disappears into nowhere. Thus I cannot say where the scene was enacted, or what ensued later. Perhaps it never took place at all. Perhaps it was a dream.

I was wandering through a garden. I must have been three or four years old, no more, at the time. I stepped from the lawn into a shrubbery of thin bushes. Blossoms, leaves, branches formed a network through which I made my way, pushing aside all these obstructions with both arms. I only remember what lay directly in the forward path of my eyes. We never can quite know what happens to either side.

So that, with both childish eyes concentrated terribly in one rapacious direction, I parted the network of branches, grasping them with both hands, flinging my arms apart, exposing to any danger a defenceless throat, sweeping a clear view for my eyes—to halt suddenly in terror at a tiny dark something that spun wickedly only a foot from my eyes! I

stopped as dead as a startled hare. A moment before all my child's arrogance had exulted in the forcing of a free passage. But now, though flushed with success—I was faced by the unpredictable. By a terrible agent of unforeseen motion, reversing with a sharp jolt every fibre of my intention. I was paralysed with fright.

The dark ball spun round and round in a decreasing circular motion. It spun too fast for my eyes to follow it. Even though it appeared to follow the smooth rhythm of a circle—nevertheless it jarred its progress in a series of jagged urgent darting movements. Never had I seen a creature move so quickly: or with such malignant intention. It threw itself round wildly, yet it was cunning. It was completely the master of its swift circles. It knew—and I knew—that it was too clever for me.

Then, as suddenly as it had sprung into motion, the creature snapped still! As it stopped, the ball seemed to unwind itself, eight spiderous legs curled out and, with a jerk, clenched the air and stopped rigid. Now the sunlight flashed into being the rapier tracery of a silver web. It spread all across the limit of my vision. I was imprisoned in a fine web, controlled absolutely by the creature that hung in its centre. My eyes were so close that I saw the fur on its body, the red gleam of its eyes, the complexity of claws and snouts that surrounded its mouth. The creature was made huge by the fear that held me. Then a light wisp of wet trailed across my face.

This touch—such a light touch—released all my terror, and I fled screaming from the shrubbery.

I have no doubt that this episode affected me deeply. Otherwise I would not recollect the details so exactly. Even today a gust of fear snakes through my spine as I revisualize it.

Now I ask myself—did this really happen? And if it did, has this one childhood shock filled my heart for evermore with a dread of—little spiders? Or have I created the whole episode, somehow to excuse this strange fear, ridiculous in the eyes of my comrades, of an insect that can be crushed so casually between the finger and thumb? Or have I perhaps seized upon a dream, so that it has affected my whole life?

When I wrote above about crushing these things between a finger and thumb, I swallowed a mouthful of fear. Even now, writing of it a second time, I shudder. I cannot bear

to touch them, even to kill them. If I wish to kill them, I must attack with a long pole—and look away.

Yet once, visiting the prison kitchens, I ran my fingers along the back of a cockroach! My fear is of spiders alone.

10th May, 1856. Drank too much at the ball last night. This morning could scarcely keep on my horse. As the parade rode down from the barracks to the Ritterschule, as the people on the pavements heard the brave jangle of our harness, as they regarded with envy the glitter of helmets and the royal flash of golden plumes . . . I thought, do they know what goes on inside our glorious uniforms? Do they realize there are bodies inside, palates dry as cracked leather, veins boiling with bad wine, aching heads that shriek at every jolt of the tight helmet? Can they count the bottles of the night before? Those gay and beautiful balls. These mornings of inquisition at the Ritterschule.

Back in my rooms, I drew the curtains and laid myself down in the half-light. The morning's exercise had done nothing to clear my head. At luncheon, a bottle of riesling had served only to loosen further the grip of my brain.

As my head flushed against the cool pillow, I stared into the shadows, vaguely, for I knew that hours must pass before my body would right itself.

I lay gazing at a black knob on the washstand. The muscles that focussed my eyes were relaxed—so that I saw two knobs instead of one. By frowning, I could focus these into one knob. But it was easier just to lie there and watch both.

Then the knobs began to move. Very slightly at first. At first the motion seemed to be a flicker of my eyelids. Then, as it continued, I realized the knobs were moving independently of me. They were not moving together, or further apart. They were moving in one definite direction. They were crawling off the washstand!

The pain in my head was so fierce that I never dared to pull my brain together, to focus my eye so that I might criticize clearly this weird progression.

As I watched, the movement of the knobs became more definite. They would make a sudden dart outwards. Then they would turn and scuttle back to their first position. For a few seconds they would stay quiet. Then another dart, a scuttling, a slow crawl. They moved all over the white

front of the washstand. Always they moved with these quick scuttling movements—the way of a mouse, a snake, a spider—the movements most alien to our normal animal perception.

How could these round knobs scuttle ?

As I questioned this, I saw a terrible thing, I saw that the knobs had grown legs ! Yes, these legs waved from the knobs and bore them to and fro.

Now I frowned and focussed my eyes. Instantly the legs disappeared, the two knobs became one, all movement ceased. What I had been watching was, after all, just a knob.

I relaxed my eyes again. The legs waved out and the knobs recommenced their scuttling search.

I remember now that similar delusions have occurred to me before. They occur only when I am ill from too much drink. Black specks on the wall, a ball of paper thrown in the corner, once even a solitary chessman—all these have flickered into life at misted moments of my brain's confusion.

This animation is probably the embryo stage of inebriate delusion. Many then see snakes. I would see another thing.

28th Dec., 1860. The worst. I have lost all cast. I am a general laughing stock. I cannot write about it. At supper in Andrassy's lodge, a spider—a fat spider—fell onto my plate. It fell on my fork. I nearly ate it. I screamed and ran from the room—in the uniform of a full captain . . .

Those are the four entries in Pansovic's journal that interested me. They are particularly relevant to my reconstruction of his extraordinary demise.

When the journals were written, Pansovic was a captain of austrian horse. By 1880, he had become a General. I was his adjutant. You will recollect that it was I who found the body of the dead general, in his own camp, throttled by his own tent, the lace-rope that killed him gripped in his curiously bandaged hand.

We had been due to attack under cover of dawn. General Pansovic was to have given the signal for attack personally. His plans were complete, and he had dismissed us early the night before. It was his custom, whenever possible, to spend the night before an action alone. He liked to rest his mind before the difficult day ahead. We had strict orders to leave him absolutely undisturbed. He would not even permit his

orderly to wake him. We used to imagine he maintained a sort of mystic vigil that nurtured him with resolution for the battle.

On the fateful morning of his death, dawn passed with no signal from the General. Gradually the valuable military twilight lightened into day. We were all at our posts, alert, wondering. The suspense that pumps at the heart before battle grew unbearable. Usually the last moments fled in harmony with the dark. The change from night to day put a limit to those moments. Thus we always knew when, exactly when, it would happen. In this way, our action had some community with the elements.

But that morning, as we waited, as we watched the sun rise, the tense moments stretched to an hour that seemed a year. At last, when it was quite light, I was dispatched to enquire whether the General had changed his plans. As you know, he had.

As I walked through the canvas-dotted aisle towards the General's tent, I was impressed by a sense of desolation. Not a sound came from any of the rows of tents. The men were all out at their battle stations. The rows of tents were empty and they looked empty. Row upon row of white conical shapes were tombstones set in their regular lines. Occasionally a canvas door-piece flapped forlornly with the wind. Nothing can seem so empty as a human habitation deserted by men. Each doorway, a black triangle set in its white canvas cone, looked like a dark eye-hole sunk in bone. I felt the dead tents watch me as I walked.

I did not see the General's head until I was quite close. It was wound over thickly with bandages and therefore white against the white tent. I thought at first that it was a bundle of rags. Then something human in its shape, or in the way it hung, struck me so surely that I broke into a run. I knew it was a head. Yet it did not loll like the head of a man hung. It was stuck there, propped up stupidly, so that it looked at once surprised and pathetic. There were no slits for the eyes. As I cut the canvas free, I noticed that the curious bandages covered the whole head and neck, even down under the collar—so that no trace of skin was exposed. The hands were bandaged with the same efficiency.

When, finally, our surgeon unwound the bandages, he found no wounds. The General Pansovic had died from

strangulation caused by the tightening of the tent-lacing round his throat. His own hand had pulled the string tight.

I slashed an entrance in the canvas. Then I went through into the dark tent. I had to push the General's body aside. The tent pole and the rope stays creaked beneath the weight of the body as it swung heavily in the darkness. It seemed as if the body itself groaned in protest. But I knew there was no life left to complain. There are unmistakable qualities in the presence of violent death. There are postures that ridicule the body. There is a bitter laugh in the air which points at what was once a man and says, with fatal definition, with implacable certainty, "Another one gone." And the air shrugs its shoulders.

The tent grew light and I saw that it was empty—but for the body, some bare camp furniture, clothes, maps, papers, and a little fighting equipment. I cut the body down. It looked like a lay figure with all those bandages. So impersonal that it sickened me, and I had to interest myself in something else quickly. I walked over to a writing table that stood in the middle of the tent, against the pole. And there, surrounded by the lifeless maps, the dead leather, the emptiness of the tent, the negative presence of the lay figure, I saw one sign of life. It was because it was alive that I remember it.

Lightly down from the canvas roof, across a squared chart, and down thence to the grass, trailed the single glistening filament of a spider's web.

It was this light, silver whisper of a web and the extracts you have read of Pansovic's journal which painted for me so vivid a picture of that secret night in the dimly lit tent. I can see the General dismissing us. He salutes gravely and, as our receding voices are lost in the maze of tents outside, as he feels himself alone, he slackens from his attitude of attention and sits down again at his table. He sees in front of him a map, a colourless design of contours and figures—but for him a bold painting of the morrow's battle. To one side a candle burns, its yellow flame erect and silent as a sentry's spear. It quivers slightly, then resumes its rigid quiet, emphasizing the stillness and the solitude. On the table gleam leather holsters, the lacquered blue of a broken seal, a round of iron shot used as a paperweight. In this circle of light, where nothing moves, the General sits and considers again his plans for the attack.

He can feel that to his right, in such and such a declivity, there are fifty cannon. He knows that the horses of his hussars stand in the trees to the left. Infantry, with bayonets pointed and polished, await his orders in their hundreds. Each company, each regiment is now at its appointed place. Lancers, grenadiers, dragoons, cannoniers, bombardiers, hussars, curassiers, fusiliers—fully two thousand men rest at their positions. Two thousand men and a vast battery of black iron await the dawn and an order from one man which will send them storming the hills above. General Pansovic can feel his tent to be the hub of this arrested movement of men. He can feel the pattern of these thousands of automatic soldiers, he can feel strongly that on the tongue in his mouth rests the sound that will alone give sudden life to that pattern. He knows that in a few hours he will rise from his chair, walk to the tent's opening, unlace the flap, stand in the doorway—and speak his one-word drama. "Attack," he will say. And the dawn will echo with movement for miles along the valley. The soldiers he loves will advance into battle. On his one word, on his exact calculation of the dawn's most advantageous light, rests the fate of thousands of men. General Pansovic was always sensible of this trust. He loved his men: though he would nevertheless dispose of them ruthlessly in the unsentimental perspective of battle.

The candle burns lower and the hours pass. Pansovic dozes lightly, then wakes himself as the time for action draws near. He screws up his eyes to sweep his mind of sleep. Then he opens them wide and sees clearly what lies before him. A table, a map, the low candle, the papers, the leather and . . . something much nearer, round, dark and hanging in the air. For a moment he thinks that it is the round of iron shot. But how can it be? Iron shot does not sit in the air.

A transparent leg waves out of the greyish ball and Pansovic's body stops moving. He sits there as stiffly as a wax figure. His eyes are not more than a dozen inches from the waving leg. Pansovic's eyes are clouded and pitiful with terror. His jaw sags weakly open and a trail of spittle hangs down from his lip to his chin. A drop falls onto the braid of his gallant tunic! But he never moves. Pansovic dares not move because, who knows?—the slightest sound might infuriate the thing in front and then it might spring at him.

So Pansovic stays quite still, and his knuckles begin to gleam as white as bone as he grips his chair in a momentous effort to remain still.

But inside the rigid form of his flesh, Pansovic's brain is working at a cruel speed. Although he dares not move his eyes to the right or to the left, for fear that his antagonist may hear the rustle of his lids and leap in that fractional moment—nevertheless he can feel his brain looking to either side. He can feel the matter of his brain working, almost writhing within the bone. It is searching for an idea of escape. And at last, when it has contorted itself into an excruciating skein of need, it sees an idea—and what might feel like little pumping grey cells start to work together again in one direction. Pansovic's brain has seen the bandages on the floor beneath the table! Pansovic's flesh knows that the danger is a touch of a waving leg on his skin, a palpable knowledge of the leg's cunning movement. Pansovic's brain calculates that the skin must be protected and that strong cloth bandages could cover the skin, every inch of skin, with beautiful seamtight precision!

What had killed Pansovic's capacity to move had been, among other things, a lack of all hope. Now, with the possibility of escape, he finds he can move again. Slowly, still keeping his face and neck rigid, from the waist, he pivots himself back from the hanging spider. His eyes remain fixed, hypnotized. Then, as his back touches the back of his chair, he screams and throws himself and the chair over on to the grass behind. Although the scream is involuntary, he nevertheless opens his mouth only at the side so that the wind of his breath shall not disturb the sensitive, unpredictable ball of soft grey.

But now all his terror is wild! Now he is tearing the bandages open! His heart is hammering and the sweat lays its waterous eggs in every pore. He is shaking and trembling with his fever. Nothing will stop this trembling. His hands, flinging open the rolled bandages, shiver so fast that, looking down, he sees them blurred. Yet he works with wonderful speed.

His brain has played him a trick. It has warned him of a possible danger that could scarcely be fact. Yet for him it is already fact. His brain has told him that there might be other spiders hanging in the dark. Instantly he knows that

they hang in correct line, making a regimental division across the tent. He knows that he must charge through this line to reach the door of the tent. He must actually brush the hanging spiders aside. He must touch them. Logical tactics, such as cutting a passage in the back of the tent, do not occur to him. The scene is fixed in one certain way. Quickened in one direction by fear, his brain has remained formal and impotent in other approaches.

He recognizes one or two urgencies. That he must reach the tent door to give his men their command. That he must bandage his skin against the contact of those waving, scuttling, cunning legs.

He winds the first bandages round his head. Until the last he leaves slits for the eyes. He must see! He must watch! Down under the collar wind the bandages. No space must be left for legs to crawl down. There—for certainty, stuff a whole bandage between the neck and the collar, like a piece of wadding! Now for the hands. First the left hand. Round and round, faster and faster, from the tips of the fingers right the way underneath the sleeve of the jacket and up the forearm. Then the right hand. Round and round again, leaving no slit, no possible crevice where a little grey ball might dart to kiss the flesh. And now . . . the eyes!

Pansovic shudders so that he is sick into his mouth. But with his white, fingerless fins he grips the last bandage and swathes it fast over the eyes. Now is the worst time! Everything has disappeared. It is dark, black, gone. In the last second, the spiders may have moved! He knows how quickly they swing and circle and dart. They may be on him! Scuttling about all over the bandages, peering with their legs into each irregularity of the bandaging! Perhaps, at the back of his head, down by his neck, where the sweat and the shuddering always start, perhaps there by the tenderest hairs—perhaps he has left a gap!

Transfixed in the dark, Pansovic feels exactly where this gap has been left. He can feel the flesh bulge out through it to meet the legs. It feels like the flesh of a young girl's throat, white, bare, perfect, revealed in sudden perfection for the first bite of love's teeth. Never was there such defenceless flesh!

Pansovic screams, muffled in the bandages, flings himself forward, plunges headlong into the line of spiders that are

not there. Shaking his head crazily he is through and he is pushing his head through the tent's doorway. One of his white fins beats wildly to catch the lacing-line that will free him. Liberty is within his grasp. But he is blind. He clutches at the wrong line, and he pulls it tight. The tent closes round his neck. Still he pulls. His brain only says "pull."

* * * *

A few hours later the enemy attacked. Caught off the defensive, we were routed. Only some two hundred men escaped. That day thousands of strong, heavily armed men were slain, as I think, by a little spider.

THE WALL

It was our third job that night.

Until this thing happened, work had been without incident. There had been shrapnel, a few enquiring bombs, and some huge fires; but these were unremarkable and have since merged without identity into the neutral maze of fire and noise and water and night, without date and without hour, with neither time nor form, that lowers mistily at the back of my mind as a picture of the air-raid season.

I suppose we were worn down and shivering. Three a.m. is a meanspirited hour. I suppose we were drenched, with the cold hose water trickling in at our collars and settling down at the tails of our shirts. Without doubt the heavy brass couplings felt moulded from metal-ice. Probably the open roar of the pumps drowned the petulant buzz of the raiders above, and certainly the ubiquitous fire-glow made an orange stage-set of the streets. Black water would have puddled the City alleys and I suppose our hands and our faces were black as the water. Black with hacking about among the burnt up rafters. These things were an every-night nonentity. They happened and they were not forgotten because they were never even remembered.

But I do remember it was our third job. And there we

were—Len, Lofty, Verno and myself, playing a fifty foot jet up the face of a tall city warehouse and thinking of nothing at all. You don't think of anything after the first few hours. You just watch the white pole of water lose itself in the fire and you think of nothing. Sometimes you move the jet over to another window. Sometimes the orange dims to black—but you only ease your grip on the ice-cold nozzle and continue pouring careless gallons through the window. You know the fire will fester for hours yet. However, that night the blank, indefinite hours of waiting were sharply interrupted—by an unusual sound. Very suddenly a long rattling crack of bursting brick and mortar perforated the moment. And then the upper half of that five-storey building heaved over towards us. It hung there, poised for a timeless second before rumbling down at us. I was thinking of nothing at all and then I was thinking of everything in the world.

In that simple second my brain digested every detail of the scene. New eyes opened at the sides of my head so that, from within, I photographed a hemispherical panorama bounded by the huge length of the building in front of me and the narrow lane on either side.

Blocking us on the left was the squat trailer pump, roaring and quivering with effort. Water throbbled from its overflow valves and from leakages in the hose and couplings. A ceaseless stream spewed down its grey sides into the gutter. But nevertheless a fat iron exhaust pipe glowed red-hot in the middle of the wet engine. I had to look past Lofty's face. Lofty was staring at the controls, hands tucked into his armpits for warmth. Lofty was thinking of nothing. He had a black diamond of soot over one eye, like the White-eyed Kaffir in negative.

To the other side of me was a free run up the alley. Overhead swung a sign—"Catto and Henley." I wondered what in hell they sold. Old stamps? The alley was quite free. A couple of lengths of dead, deflated hose wound over the darkly glistening pavement. Charred flotsam dammed up one of the gutters. A needle of water fountained from a hole in a live hose-length. Beneath a blue shelter light lay a shattered coping stone. The next shop along was a tobacconist's, windowless, with fake display cartons torn open for anybody to see. The alley was quite free.

Behind me, Len and Verno shared the weight of the hose,

They heaved up against the strong backward drag of water-pressure. All I had to do was yell "Drop it"—and then run. We could risk the live hose snaking up at us. We could run to the right down the free alley—Len, Verno and me. But I never moved. I never said "Drop it" or anything else. That long second held me hypnotized, rubber boots cemented to the pavement. Ton upon ton of red-hot brick hovering in the air above us numbed all initiative. I could only think. I couldn't move.

Six yards in front stood the blazing building. A minute before I would never have distinguished it from any other drab Victorian atrocity happily on fire. Now I was immediately certain of every minute detail. The building was five storeys high. The top four storeys were fiercely alight. The rooms inside were alive with red fire. The black outside walls remained untouched. And thus, like the lighted carriages of a night express, there appeared alternating rectangles of black and red that emphasized vividly the extreme symmetry of the window spacing: each oblong window shape posed as a vermilion panel set in perfect order upon the dark face of the wall. There were ten windows to each floor, making forty windows in all. In rigid rows of ten, one row placed precisely above the other, with strong contrasts of black and red, the blazing windows stood to attention in strict formation. The oblong building, the oblong windows, the oblong spacing. Orange-red colour seemed to *bulge* from the black frame-work, assumed tactile values, like boiling jelly that expanded inside a thick black squared grill.

Three of the storeys, thirty blazing windows and their huge frame of black brick, a hundred solid tons of hard, deep Victorian wall, pivoted over towards us and hung flatly over the alley. Whether the descending wall actually paused in its fall I can never know. Probably it never did. Probably it only seemed to hang there. Probably my eyes digested its action at an early period of momentum, so that I saw it "off true" but before it had gathered speed.

The night grew darker as the great mass hung over us. Through smoke-fogged fireglow the moonlight had hitherto penetrated to the pit of our alley through declivities in the skyline. Now some of the moonlight was being shut out as the wall hung ever further over us. The wall shaded the

moonlight like an inverted awning. Now the pathway of light above had been squeezed to a thin line. That was the only silver lining I ever believed in. It shone out—a ray of hope. But it was a declining hope, for although at this time the entire hemispherical scene appeared static, an imminence of movement could be sensed throughout—presumably because the scene was actually moving. Even the speed of the shutter which closed the photograph on my mind was powerless to exclude this motion from a deeper consciousness. The picture appeared static to the limited surface senses, the eyes and the material brain, but beyond that there was hidden movement.

The second was timeless. I had leisure to remark many things. For instance, that an iron derrick, slightly to the left, would not hit me. This derrick stuck out from the building and I could feel its sharpness and hardness as clearly as if I had run my body intimately over its contour. I had time to notice that it carried a footlong hook, a chain with three-inch rings, two girder supports and a wheel more than twice as large as my head.

A wall will fall in many ways. It may sway over to the one side or the other. It may crumble at the very beginning of its fall. It may remain intact and fall flat. This wall fell as flat as a pancake. It clung to its shape through ninety degrees to the horizontal. Then it detached itself from the pivot and slammed down on top of us.

The last resistance of bricks and mortar at the pivot point cracked off like automatic gun fire. The violent sound both deafened us and brought us to our senses. We dropped the hose and crouched. Afterwards Verno said that I knelt slowly on one knee with bowed head, like a man about to be knighted. Well, I got my knighting. There was an incredible noise—a thunderclap condensed into the space of an eardrum—and then the bricks and the mortar came tearing and burning into the flesh of my face.

Lofty, away by the pump, was killed. Len, Verno and myself they dug out. There was very little brick on top of us. We had been lucky. We had been framed by one of those symmetrical, oblong window spaces.

THE INSPECTOR

Just as the clerk was on the very point of alighting from the bus, he found his way blocked by the dark figure of a man much taller than himself.

Murmuring an apology, although he had no reason to suppose that he was the more to blame for this coincidence, the clerk sidestepped and attempted to make his way on the other side of the intersecting steel pillar. But immediately he moved, a hand gripped the sleeve of his jacket. It gripped his jacket furtively, yet with authority. The fingers seemed to caress the cloth they touched as though they recognized and apologized for an assault that nevertheless they intended to pursue with vigour.

At this point the clerk noticed that the tall man was wearing uniform of some kind. The canopy of the bus and the bright sunlight beyond shadowed his exact identity. As the clerk sensed the uniform, his arm, which he had begun to withdraw, slackened its tension and yielded. A sensation of old guilt, latent in even the most innocent passenger, disturbed the clerk's inner equilibrium. He felt his capacities shrink, and the words in his mind, although unspoken, were pitched several tones higher than was normal.

"May I see your ticket, please?" The clerk was instantly impressed that this must be the Inspector. He now raised his eyes. The Inspector's face was closely shaven, round and greyish white, with a hard polish. His cold eyes seemed to search through the clerk, yet they fixed themselves on the knot of the clerk's tie rather than on his eyes, in order that their accusation, although authoritative, should not appear discourteous.

"I'm sorry," said the clerk. "I left it upstairs. And now a sailor is sitting on it." This was the truth. The clerk had placed his ticket on the seat beside him, and then a petty officer had taken the very seat. The clerk had not liked to disturb the petty officer, since the necessity of the ticket appeared less than the necessity of the petty officer's comfort.

Although the Inspector now frowned, his lips remained set in their solid smile. "So a sailor is sitting on it? Well, I must say I haven't heard that one before!" He glanced back at the conductor bitterly. When his eyes returned to

the clerk, they were cold and once more efficient. "Now, sir, I must ask you for your ticket, please."

"But a sailor is sitting on it," repeated the clerk.

At this the Inspector seemed for a moment to lose his composure. He took a light step backward and looked for support to the conductor. His voice was uncertain as he spoke again, "What? A sailor? You mean a *sailor* is sitting on your ticket?"

"Yes, upstairs. But I feel it would be a pity to disturb him over such a trifle. I realize that the ticket is important to you—but you have my word that I did buy one and that it now rests beneath the sailor. Besides, I see that the conductor," here the clerk smiled at the conductor, who acknowledged him with a hopeful nod, "wants to ring his bell and re-start the journey. And I presume it is important that the bus runs to schedule?"

The Inspector had listened attentively, with increasing consternation. "But I must see the ticket," he said. "Let's get the matter straight and see the ticket first."

The conductor coughed nervously. "We ought to go now, sir," he said. "We're behind schedule."

It was clear that the Inspector resented this intrusion. For he turned his face slightly away from the conductor, wrinkling his brow and affecting not to have heard the conductor's plea. But the conductor persisted. "As a matter of fact," the conductor continued, in a lowered voice of apology, "I can safely say that I remember selling this gentleman a ticket."

Now the Inspector raised his shoulders, so that he seemed to grow a full inch taller, and compressed his lips with reserved indignation. "That is not the point at all," he said. "It is not exactly that I distrust the words of either this gentleman here, or you, my conductor. I am quite ready to believe even the story about the sailor. In fact on the whole I am more inclined to believe the story than disbelieve it. But—I must see the ticket. It is the Inspector's duty to look at the ticket. That must be put first, above all else."

There was a ring of finality in the Inspector's voice. Nevertheless neither he nor the clerk moved. They stood on the constricted platform facing each other, waiting for the action which should automatically have followed. Only the conductor moved. He shifted his hand from the bell and began to work his punch nervously. Two middle-aged

women with straight corseted backs and untidy hats watched the scene from the corners of their eyes. An old man chewed his gums and muttered his own solution inaudibly. A boy in greased dungarees gaped.

At last the clerk spoke. "In any case, we can't stand here all day. I have to . . ."

But the Inspector interrupted him, raising his huge right hand to command the proper silence. "I think you had better go up the stairs and retrieve the ticket."

"And disturb the sailor? And delay the bus further? Cannot you see that even if I had not bought a ticket, the conductor would have sold at least ten tickets to make up for that default—had you permitted the bus to move to the next stop? Surely you must bear in mind first the eventual profit of the service you represent?"

The Inspector screwed up his eyes. Then he said, quickly, "And where would the Transport be if everybody rode through without buying a ticket?"

"In practice, 'everybody' would never do that," replied the clerk. "That kind of average has been proved time and again."

Although the clerk had spoken politely, even with reserve, the Inspector appeared suddenly to become enraged, possibly by some suspicion that the clerk, an educated man, had knowledge that he, a promoted working man, could never possess. Thus he would have invented a tone of superiority in the clerk's voice. Now, his massive white face reddening with secret blood, he gripped the clerk by the arm and began to force him towards the stairway.

The clerk disliked force, and for that reason considered resistance unnecessary. He allowed himself to be pushed up the stairway, although the grip on his arm tightened cruelly as soon as it was plain that he would show no fight. The conductor followed them up the stairs, prepared to obey the Inspector's whim, although he must personally have favoured the argument of the clerk. After them came the boy, the middle-aged women and the old man, who still grumbled his solution of the problem beneath his breath, so that no one could hear it and perhaps criticize him.

A petty officer sat on the third seat from the front of the bus. He had remained on the other half of the seat, although the inner seat had been vacated. This appeared to the

Inspector unusual and to be suspected. There is something casual and dangerously independent about the passenger who does not automatically regiment himself into the corners of the vehicle. Consequently the Inspector did not soften his voice when he tapped the petty officer on the shoulder and explained to him the situation. The petty officer stretched a leg with naval diffidence. Still without answering, he produced and lit a cigarette. The conductor stood directly behind the Inspector, like a shadow. The two women stumbled to seize and sit on the seat immediately behind the petty officer. The boy began to gape at something out of the window that had attracted his bewildered eye. Presently he remembered what he had come to see and returned his gaze to the Inspector. The old man had discovered an advertisement that he now scanned with intense interest. He stood on the seat and ran his nose up and down the print, not more than an inch away. It was evident from the precarious position he had chosen, and from the settling down of the others, that none of the passengers expected the bus to move for some time. The clerk had now freed his arm from the Inspector's grip and was watching the petty officer's face attentively.

With greater emphasis the Inspector repeated his explanation. "So you see," he ended, "I must ask you to move. It is essential that I see this ticket." His voice rose triumphantly. Now, it seemed, all must be settled. The Inspector must have believed fully that the ticket was beneath the sailor. Probably he had never for a moment doubted the clerk's story. The triumphant tone of his voice conveyed itself through the bus, and the passengers started to shuffle and sigh with disappointment.

The petty officer drew deeply at his cigarette. He seemed to be considering the case deeply. At last he said, "I'm sorry, but I must decline to move. For various reasons." Throughout this short speech, and in fact during the entire episode, he had never raised his eyes.

At this the passengers resettled themselves with satisfaction, now riveting their whole attention on the smaller group standing before the petty officer. The old man had jumped down from the seat and now took up a position directly behind the conductor, peering through the triangle of space formed by his arm and body. The Inspector had taken a

step back at the sudden reversal. Suddenly he snapped out a notebook and fluttered the leaves, as if to threaten the petty officer.

"You see, in order to investigate certain underground pressures, in connection with experiments upon which I was then engaged—I went down a coal mine. It was just a month ago last Thursday. I am in the submarines, of course, and although the experiments were unofficial, they were concerned entirely with the improvement of submarines."

"You made these experiments, then, in a spirit of personal zeal—but unofficial zeal—for the benefit of the Royal Submarines?" interjected the clerk.

"Exactly," agreed the petty officer. "I was not officially on active duty, but in all effect I was at useful work. But allow me to continue. It was dark in the mine. I was examining a disused shaft. There was no set lighting, so I carried a lantern. It was a deepish shaft and of an interest to me that absorbed my senses to the exclusion of everything else."

One of the middle-aged women leant forward and tapped the officer on the shoulder. "How deep was it, young man?" she asked.

"About 300 feet," answered the petty officer promptly. The woman leant back, and nodded repeatedly to her companion, as if to confirm some mutual achievement.

"My ears," continued the petty officer, "were therefore closed to the sound of the warning gong which was then being sounded through the mine. Some ten minutes later a wall of water sluiced into the shaft with terrific force. I was completely submerged. Several pitprops collapsed, one crushing my left leg. How I retained the strength to struggle free, I shall never know. Nevertheless I did manage to free myself. And, what was of course more, I managed to swim out of the shaft into the main corridor, where I was able to tread water and breathe. For the main corridor was not completely submerged. There was a two foot passage of air between the roof and the surface of the water."

"Eventually they rescued me, half-drowned and with one leg out of action. Subsequently I developed pneumonia, but that passed. However, the leg is still almost useless. The smallest movement occasions me great pain. So you see," and here he raised his eyes for the first time and stared

the Inspector sternly in the very eyes, "that is why I do not wish to move from this seat. I had trouble enough climbing up here. Do you yourself consider that the revelation of this man's ticket is really worth the pain it would cause me?"

The woman who had previously spoken turned stiffly to the Inspector. "The pain of a boy who endured wounds for his country's sake—that's what he ought to say."

"I should think that settles the matter," said the clerk smiling gratefully at the petty officer, but with a softness in his voice which expressed sympathy for the wound.

The Inspector sat down on one of the seats. The conductor had just time to dodge away. Now he too sat down. The clerk, realizing that he was the only person left standing, immediately took the seat in front of the petty officer. Thus the company were arranged in a rough semi-circle around the clerk and the Inspector. Everyone watched the Inspector, who sat staring with silent disbelief at his huge hands. Both the strength of these hands and the crisp power of the notebook that rested on his knee were apparently of no further use. His brows knitted themselves into a fearful pattern, as though some little used muscle were screwing his brain. Wearily he turned to the clerk. "May I see your Identity Card?" he said. The clerk promptly handed it to him. This seemed to infuriate the Inspector, who had hoped perhaps for at least a momentary advantage. He sat with the Identity Card in his hand and glared angrily at the clerk. There was no information on the card that he could ever use against the clerk. Nevertheless, that sharp flare of anger must have galvanized, in some way, the workings of the Inspector's brain, for now his eyes refocussed and he said to the petty officer, "I understand, however, that you were not officially on duty when this accident occurred?"

The petty officer nodded. "Then how," said the Inspector turning triumphantly to the assembled passengers, "could this wound be described as a valid injury? In effect, the sailor was on leave. The wound is therefore unofficial and does not merit recognition among our sympathies."

"Yet I was furthering the cause for which my duty is arranged."

The Inspector smiled and fingered the red tape that encircled his sleeve cuff. "That is hardly the point," he said, regarding the petty officer slowly, in the manner of a

large slug that moves with silent, imperceptible speed above its paralysed victim. But the petty officer was in no way paralysed. He, more than anyone in the bus, was unaware of the danger. On several occasions recently he had faced death. Thus his senses of proportion had widened and few things mattered in the old way.

But the clerk leapt to his feet. Grasping the roof support with one hand, and motioning towards the Inspector with the other, he cried, "Then you believe the Transport can thus over-ride all individual sense? That the channels of the system are rigid, like the steel arteries of a subterranean fluid plant, rather than malleable, like veins of sensitive flesh? The Transport was never contrived so! The Transport was built for economy of effort, for ease. How can the soft tegument of its channels have hardened into this kind of a law?"

The Inspector nodded his head rhythmically, accentuating the words of his answer, which he repeated in the manner of a chant, "The system of the Transport must remain quite rigid." The conductor pressed his finger up and down on the button of his punch in sympathy with the Inspector's chant. But now no bell rang on the punch. Only the swift crunching of metal on paper could be heard.

"Yet in remaining rigid," the clerk continued, "the system defeats its original purpose. Instead of serving the passengers, it begins to accuse them, then to imprison them, and finally to consume itself."

The Inspector emerged from his chant, which had continued beneath the clerk's statement. He said, frowning at the clerk. "The Transport believe, you see, that human nature is inevitably on the scrounge. That must be stopped at all costs."

Just at this moment the old man appeared. He staggered along the gangway with a huge urn clasped in his arms. The boy followed him with a trayful of assorted delicacies. These he commenced to hand to the passengers, while the old man, having set down the urn on an empty seat, poured from it cups of aromatic coffee. The Inspector seemed a trifle discomfited at this procedure, but presently the old man turned to him, winked, and mumbled "It's all right. I've written out a chit." Instantly the Inspector returned the wink and smiled quickly.

Now the clerk took his cup and, slacking his body against the supporting roof pillar, said, "Please don't talk to me about human nature in that tone—as though it were a permanently changeless factor of evil. You are absurd. What you call human nature is made up essentially of changing constituents. Only animal nature remains perceptibly the same. Human nature is in reality the miraculous spirit of enquiry that searches into the mystic satisfaction of the universe's pattern. It is only animal nature that gluts itself on the material of existence."

The Inspector twisted his pale lips into the scornful smile of an amused parent. He waited with tolerant patience till the clerk had finished. Then he spoke. "Nevertheless—what about the scroungers, the slickers, the easy livers? You must say—they exist!"

"Certainly they exist. But how they have decreased! How much tamer the people are!"

"Tamer," said the Inspector, an old light of pleasure kindling his eye. "That is a word I like. And what has done it? Why—the system! It has tamed and improved them beyond measure and doubt."

"I regret to disagree—it is despite the system that people have become less animal. They have not been tamed. You misconstrue my application of the word. They have been enlightened. At least a little enlightened. But that is the first light on a large enough scale that has ever been revealed to them."

Now the petty officer looked up with interest. He gazed calmly into the very eyes of the tremendous Inspector, saying "Now—for God's sake don't come back with this business of modern warfare. War now is no general choice. The real horrors of war—the savage hatred between individuals, the perverted glories, the waving of flags and the joy of distant blood—these have largely disappeared. These were the real and spiritual horrors that destroyed people. Now, one can only sense a gradual bewilderment among the people. By the extreme efficiency of its weapons and the horrible lesson they expound, science itself is at last enlightening people to war's futility. By what is temporarily construed as a misuse, science is perceptibly cleansing the world of animal violence."

The Inspector laughed. "That's a long speech for a sailor," he said. "And I agree with you that war at this

speed is only temporary. But afterwards, you see, *we* will control the new weapons. And then we shall be able to tame on a more thorough scale the slickers whose existence my friend here does not admit." He rubbed his hands with glee. Then he added gravely, leaning in confidence towards the petty officer's ear. "I fully foresee the day when my buses will be constructed to cover entire highways. Thus when the passengers enter, they may complete the journey on foot, but along our specially constructed gangway. The buses need never move. We can thus economize on staff and fuel. The passengers will never fully realize this."

The clerk had not been listening. He had been considering some point far back in his mind. Now he muttered to the Inspector, and to the bus at large, "So it comes to this. The Transport, all the vitals of the evolved bureaucratic Transport, function henceforth solely to detect dishonesty. That is the reason for every signature, every form, every ticket. Because it is imagined somewhere that the passengers cannot be trusted."

The Inspector stood up and spun round in a complete turn. "Exactly! And the passengers agree! They know the Transport is right! They love the Transport! Take this woman here . . ." He motioned to one of the middle-aged women, who promptly stood up and rested her head enquiringly on one side. The Inspector said to her, "Do you agree with what I've said, madam?"

The woman knew immediately what to do. She found herself on formal ground. This appeared to provide fuel for her limbs and tongue. She pirouetted smartly. And then, nodding to everyone in the bus, she smiled, "It must be right. It must be right. *They* say so." She curtsied and withdrew to her seat. There she commenced to nod to her companion in perpetual hennish agreement.

The clerk lowered himself wearily to his seat. He wiped his brow. Then, breathing deeply to regather strength, he raised his face to the general level and continued the discussion. Always the clerk spoke with polite reserve. Yet he posed his various reasonings with a certain power. But whatever he said, he obtained only the same impassive response from the Inspector. Sometimes the petty officer, who had exhausted himself of fear, interposed some statement or other with real disinterest. The clerk fought fear with reason.

The petty officer had no fear to drive him, but reasoned nevertheless because reason was in him.

For days they talked. The old man and the boy served them regularly with meals. Sometimes one or other of the passengers slept a little. Gradually the days lengthened to weeks, and a little seed that had fallen beneath the wheels of the bus began to sprout its green blades of grass.

One day, much later, the clerk ceased to address the Inspector. He turned instead to the old man, who was busy writing out his chits. "Can't you, at least, in the wisdom of your age, see that the Transport is defeating itself? Can't you see what has happened here, about my ticket? Can't you count the days wasted, the vital hours spent in judicial enquiry, when we could all have used them to discover so many fine things? Can't you sense the approach of death, the shortening of the time you have to discover what you feel in your heart is worth discovering?"

The old man shook his head. He paused a moment from his chits, but his pencil remained poised for the next figure. "Man and boy," he said, "I've kept to the law. Man and boy." And he continued writing.

The clerk turned swiftly to the boy. "And you," he said, "don't you desire to go out? To discover what is pulling at your breast? You, surely, shall dissolve with your young blood the tightening pillars of this cage!"

The boy, who had never been spoken to before, cowered back against the chromium railing. "I've done no wrong," he stuttered, repeating the words over and over again. "I've done no wrong."

The clerk leapt from his seat and clutched the conductor by his lapels. He shook him, but the conductor only laughed and danced, apparently taking the clerk's action for some game. The clerk spoke passionately, a few inches from the laughing face before him. "And you? What about you?" But the conductor just continued to dance. And, pointing at the Inspector, he sang, to the accompaniment of his dancing feet, "He's the boss! He's the boss! It won't hurt me because—he's the boss!"

At this all restraint left the clerk. He threw the conductor from him, and screamed aloud. "All this! All this! When I might have thrown my ticket in the used ticket bin!" He tore savagely at his hair. "When I had passed the bin!"

When I had passed it ! ” He collapsed sobbing on the floor, on the floor littered with used tickets.

But now the Inspector had risen. Now he was standing, to the full extent of his great height, bowed nearly double by the roof of the bus. He caught the clerk by the collar of his coat. “ What ? What was that ? ” he asked in a thunderous whisper. “ You had passed the used ticket bin ? You could in fact have placed your ticket in the official bin ? ”

The clerk nodded weakly, too exhausted even to raise his head, which hung down from his taut collar like the head of a man hanged.

The Inspector stamped twice on the floor. This was a message to the driver. As he stamped, he spoke. Coldly, to no one particular person. “ Ladies and gentlemen, the bus may proceed.”

SATURATION POINT

THE cinema of the mind !

An imaginary picture is projected on that indefinite screen flanked, but never confined, by pillars of fleshed bone and the alert muscle of a frown.

The screen lightens and there appears the corner of a ruined town ! The corner is theatrically convenient. It is part of a small square—and the cobbled stage lies unobstructed, spacious, squarely backed by a straight façade, neatly masked on each side by sheets of perpendicular flame. Artillery and the air corps have been at work on the façade : the dark windows are glassless, the brickwork has been torn, one house has quite disappeared. Thus it is really the shell of a façade, lifeless and forlorn. Paper shreds of an old poster flap wearily in the empty wind. A long veil of white dust still drifts across the stage.

Two orderlies enter and place in the centre of the stage a dining table, two chairs and a champagne bucket. Flowers, silver dishes, polished glasses and a fine white cloth decorate the table with good living.

The orderlies retire to the left and a shadow approaches from the opposite wing. It is the shadow of a very tall man, and as it lengthens across the firelit cobbles, you can discern plainly the nodding of a head-dress and the independent outline of a scabbard.

The shadow floods to its full length and becomes a man, who now strides forward onto the stage—the finest officer you ever saw!

He is a giant. But tall as he is, the towering bearskin creates an illusion that he is even taller. This bearskin is dyed pirate black and tapers forward hideously. The officer's scabbard is curved like a sabre and he drags it far behind him as he walks. For the rest, his uniform is black, leathery, elegant. His face is sharp with moustaches, blotched red with bad veins—but no one can see his eyes, for they are tucked beneath the snub peak of the bearskin. Only the semi-circular base of a monocle betrays the position of one eye. High collar and heavy chinstrap keep rigid this military mask of a face.

He stamps over to the table, slumps down in a chair, throws a leathern map holster across the white linen, belches, points his moustache elegantly with an angular fingertip, and begins to bark orders at either wing.

The lateral flames flow more fiercely, orderlies run in and run out bearing champagne, pens and protocols. They address the officer as "commandant"—and it is soon plain that this man is a conqueror on the march.

Now it is time for the commandant to begin his performance proper. (His audience are the vanquished, who remain standing unseen in the dark auditorium.)

The commandant, with earlier fears concentrated into an enormous lust, is equipped to perform many tricks.

First he will perform the mechanical tricks, the recurrent overture that is always quite quickly dispatched. Orderlies enter bearing food and wine won by the steel. A few women are herded beneath the table. They disappear behind the white cloth, from which, after a certain sojourn, they are dragged in a state of exhaustion.

And now the commandant will be pleased to display the refinements of his prowess! We shall now be enchanted with greater wizardries! Old men are therefore laid at his feet, bodies outstretched, their heads positioned towards the

commandant's fine boots. At his leisure, the commandant begins to kick in the old men's brains. One old man is cleverly kept kneeling—to repolish the commandant's boots after each execution. He must polish the boots with his bald head alone.

Next a little girl of twelve is made to stand by the table with outstretched hand. This the commandant likes to use for an ashtray. From time to time he presses out his cigarstub into this young flesh, which screams piteously, to the commandant's great satisfaction.

Now there is a great joke! The babies are brought in! Simultaneously a seasoned pigsty rises magically from the floor! The commandant flicks the babies with his whip so that they crawl on their hands and knees through the gate of the sty. There they will live for ever. The pigs, of course, may run free.

Throughout these expressions of prowess, which hold the audience fascinated, the commandant continually invokes the lateral flames to greater intensity, commands the noises of destruction to resound ceaselessly within the shelled façade, makes certain that the veiled powder of disintegration still floats on the air, repeats from time to time his overtures with the food and the women.

This is an enchanted plunder of infinite possibility. The people are maintained in a trance of expectation. What more will the ingenious fellow be up to? What lies hidden yet in that roguish sleeve of his? The commandant looks round for further appetite. He claps his hands.

Enter Gaustette!

Gaustette is the celebrated, most beautiful Gaustette. She is the rare beauty. Unapproachable, exquisite, fabulous—this forbidden loveliness is henceforth the property of the commandant alone. Gaustette enters dressed in a virtuous gown of the purest white. Beneath those silken skirts there are said to be legs—legs insured for several millions of francs. Gracefully she inclines her head towards the commandant. The commandant motions her to the chair beside him. Pointing his moustache with elegant fingertips, he runs an eye over the presence of Gaustette, striving to invent a trick worthy of such fabulous material.

It appears that Gaustette will acquiesce. She sits proudly surrendered. She sits erect, but apparently at the com-

mandant's whim. Yet—there is something about her lips. It is a little smile that plays about her lips. Her lips are curved, faintly, in the faraway smile of a woman with a secret. Perhaps this is the secret of all womenkind? Or perhaps it is one woman's secret—how can one be sure? It is a little smile, detached from all her immediate gestures, the smile on the face of a cat whose secret eyes stare away from the hand that caresses its fur. Gaustette is storing some poised excitement in those distant eyes, in that detached and tolerant smile for the commandant. Gaustette is brimful of design!

The commandant leans back, flings his arms generously wide, and from the heart of his gluttony he says: "Proceed, madame . . . you are at my service . . ."

Gaustette turns to him and smiles her invitation. She reaches with one pale hand for the hem of her gown—while the other drifts towards a silver carving knife. Then, coquetry and modesty deliciously interlarded, she begins to raise her skirt. Hesitating modestly, yet never once really stopping, the silk slips up her calf. Now her naked knee, now her most precious thigh is revealed for the commandant's saliva.

The commandant is at first fascinated by the revelation of this exquisite leg—but suddenly a rigidity clenches at his shoulders. You might have thought he was petrified with desire. But look closer—and you will see the paralysis of terror!

The commandant is paralysed—but Gaustette, Gaustette is all movement! Swiftly she snatches at the bright carving knife! A brilliant arc of silver as the knife descends through its wild parabola! Gaustette slices—a long cut of meat from her own leg!

The commandant whinnies shortly and sits still. Gaustette places the sliver of meat on a plate and hands this to the commandant. But now the commandant cannot raise his hand to receive the plate. His head has collapsed forward onto his black chest. He sits listlessly knowing only one thing. For he has seen that the texture of Gaustette's thigh is not the pale vellum of her true skin. Instead, it is brown and crisp and oiled.

Gaustette's leg has been roasted! Drugging herself at the loin, Gaustette has had her leg roasted for the commandant's table!

It is too much. It is the saturation point of this comman-

dant's plunderous aspiring. The great man rises. He takes his sword and breaks it across his knee. He will never need it again. Effort of the sword's sort has ceased for want of an impulse. The decay of fulfilment has begun. Sobbing, broken by the spectre of realized aspiration, he departs, in the direction whence he entered, never again to return. For what would be the use ?

FIREMAN FLOWER

It was not fear, but rather an oppressive sense of expectancy that made the fireman study his belt buckle with such nervous interest.

At the time he was riding to a most important fire. Looking out from the back of the van he could see how clean the streets had been washed by the night. The racing tarmac slipped back so smoothly that the trailer pump's heavy tyres no more than rustled. Now and then the towing pin slugged heavily in and out of its oiled sprung socket. Sometimes, on an acute camber, a silver thread of petrol fountained from a pin-hole in the petrol tank cap. There was little other movement. The vehicle raced evenly forward. The fireman saw only the dark linoleum road slipping backwards: or, if he raised his eyes, the departing rows of houses, the terraces, the crescents, regular, eyeless, washed grey by the moonlight.

The fireman scrutinized the buckling of his belt and thought: "Now I can see quite plainly, perhaps for the first time, that this is me, that this is Fireman Flower, that I am riding my pump to a most important fire, that inevitably I shall soon be engaged upon my most important task. I knew the nature of that task as soon as I heard the call to this particular fire. My task is succinctly—to discover the kernel of the fire. I must disregard the fire's offshoots, I must pass over the fire's deceptive encroachments, and I must proceed most determinedly in search of the fire's kernel. Only in that way can I assess efficiently the whole nature of the fire . . ."

He looked up from his belt, over to his companions. These

fellows sat silently in rows on either side of the tender. They wore round steel helmets. In their heavy, thigh-long boots, their thick tunics, their firm belts, their ropes, their axes—they sat immobile and hugely impassive as figures painted on a poster. In each of these motionless statues there could be sensed strongly a suppressed capacity for action, the same spirit that haunts a suit of armour standing so stilly in a dark passage. Suddenly, with no warning, the suit of armour leaps forward to consummate with swift iron jaws the lust of its long watch.

Fireman Flower continued: "These are my companions. Of course I am not alone in my task. How should I be unique? No, we are all engaged upon this job of the fire, and we are all equipped similarly with both the incentive to complete the job and the weapons with which to work. As our uniforms depict us, so are we uniform. We start equally and end—wherever our selected tactics shall lead us."

A moment later Flower realized that he was in a measure mistaken. For although the uniforms, for instance, appeared at first sight to be exactly similar, there were in fact many subtle differences among them. An example—this man wore a gas-shield on his helmet, while his neighbour's helmet remained innocent of the rubbery hood. From the dark collar of another man's tunic there pried a wisp of red scarf: but the next man's neck was wound round with what might have been a chequered kitchen cloth. Again, one man had been issued with rubber leggings—while his fellow wore heavy black oilskin. These were the fortuitous equipments with which each man had been provided during the rambling months of his early service. Sometimes these individual acquisitions were of the man's own choice: in other cases they were products of the climate of his past fortune. Nevertheless—generally the men had been provided with similar materials of opportunity. "All my companions have it in them to search for the kernel of the fire," thought Flower. "In the first place it is written down in Brigade Regulations—'First proceed straight to the seat of the fire.' Thus these men are all imbued from the start with the one central idea." Flower paused and reconsidered this truth. "No, I am wrong," he continued, "for certainly one man of these, for instance, is the predetermined operator of the pump itself. Circumstances have cast this man irrevocably for the role of

motorman and now he has literally no desire at all to climb: he will remain in the street with his pump and probably he will never consider for a moment that he might have wished to do otherwise. Perhaps once the desire to climb will pull at his quietened senses: but instantly he will glance back at his pump and he will see how firmly its huge suction-pipe is screwed down to the mouth of the subterranean hydrant—so that this inevitable marriage of his machine with the street will reassure him, and desire will pass easily. The motorman will never realize the possibility that matters could have been otherwise, and he will never really mind. Besides, there are so many switches and wheels to occupy his mind.

“But the others . . . what will *they* do?”

Now a new element seemed to be warming the flying ranks of dead houses. Fireman Flower sniffed the air. Yes—the first rare scent of burning! And the houses were coming gradually to life as the moonlit grey reddened with a reflection from the distance to which they were speeding. Soon there would echo towards them the cries of the crowd and the roar of pumps already at work. Flower braced his chest and tightened his chinstrap. Now the awe that precedes great things flooded his being. He fingered his axe, his scarf. Everything was ready. Suddenly a warm wind blew in at the back of the van bearing with it the full stench of burning. Fireman Flower welcomed this with open lungs and leapt to his feet. Grasping the roof of the van he forced his head above to look forward for the first time since the journey had begun. A moment before—the grey pump and the polished road: and now, as though a curtain had been raised, he gazed fully upon the lighted, living, blazing panorama of the distant fire itself!

As the fire rode towards him, as the fly figures of firemen and audience grew distinct, as the wind blew hotter and as each plaster cornice and brick façade was washed more brightly in the copper glow—Fireman Flower rapidly assessed the building that enclosed somewhere the secret he must unravel.

It was a solitary edifice of huge proportions: it reared gigantically from ground that was on either side level and empty: it stood aloof as a cathedral in the sanctuary of its own square. This was unusual—for Flower knew how that part of the city was known to be tightly packed with buildings

intersected by only the most narrow streets and alleys. Yet here was this immense edifice standing quite alone! And Flower's pump was now racing up a broad highway that led straight towards the great central door, a road that dramatized the building's tremendous isolation, the aloof building that reared so hugely against the nightblue sky, alone on its firelit plain, unencumbered by the city, a black castle flecked with orange flames that crashed from its windows and among its high turrets like the flames in a fairy tale.

But it was neither castle nor cathedral. It was a black-bricked warehouse of hideous design. False turrets and complexities of tiling spattered its immense façade. Three high towers surmounted an embattlemented roof. The great front wall rose through fourteen deep storeys: and around its whole bulk one could have cast a measure many thousands of feet long. Archways, porticos, tunnels and great draysize doors seemed to undermine at pavement level the solid weight above. Derricks and cranes stood out from the higher walls. Occasionally platforms appeared, and sometimes an iron balcony with its attendant staircase jutted out suddenly from one place in the wall—only to disappear again as if on a secret errand, a few storeys above. And now at various points in this huge dark façade there were patches of bright fire. Smoke boiled out from some windows. Inner flames silhouetted the frames of others. A group of a dozen windows would be illuminated like the regular windows of a railway carriage. Then again, fiercely twisting sheets of flame would roll out from behind a buttress, flap and bite at the night air, then recoil as suddenly as they had advanced, disappearing conclusively, curling back suddenly like the tongue of a butterfly. At times one might have thought that there was a bellows at work inside the building. Flames whose shape could not be fixed by the eye fanned out suddenly from nowhere with a combustible hiss of great power. And other flames remained within the building, reflecting themselves flatly without a flicker through the redhot window squares.

On the level firelit plain surrounding the building there were a couple of dozen pumps already at work. They hummed with effort and their squab grey sides quivered as they sucked and churned the water before throwing it out towards the fire. Line upon line of hose snaked firewards

from the pumps. The lines crossed and curled and intermingled like the white wet roots of a water plant. Some of the larger pumps—the old shiplike fire engines themselves—threw out perhaps four lines of hose each! So that the ground had become treacherous with traps for the firemen who scuttled to and from the fire. More and more of these firemen were arriving. From a distance they resembled a scattered squadron of nesting ants—for there was a purposed bustle in their running and clambering that, although unregimented, was plainly part of an urgent communal effort. They looked particularly like ants because, while admiring their industry, one could never understand exactly what they were doing.

Fireman Flower's pump reached the perimeter of the hose swarm and bumped its way across the swelling lines. Hose filled with high pressure water was hard and solid as whipcord. Here and there pinprick holes punctuated it and through these the water spurted high, in thin fountains. The van settled down to a halt, and just as he was jumping to the ground Fireman Flower caught one of these fine needles of water on the side of his neck. He ran straight on towards the fire without so much as shaking his head. But his face had lightened a little, for the cold douche of water must have felt to Flower as firefighting feels. The dry fire! The wettest place of all!

Now Flower doubled straight forward, stepping his course over the hose, intent only on entering the building as quickly as he could. Grit and charred flotsam had mixed with the outpouring water so that the once white hose now lay mud-soaked, drenched to the colour of a rainlogged tennis ball. The firemen's heavy boots sludged over the hose without forgiveness. Flower's boots were firm and heavy. They piled up a momentum that forced his willing body forward at an ever faster pace—until he was beneath the overhanging cornices of the building itself, breathing the first thick smoke, hot now and choosing his entrance.

There were three doors within immediate sight. To the left gaped the black hollow of a wide arch with double-doors open: to the right was a small single door flanked by a concierge's wooden cabin: and directly in front of Flower rose a decorated portico that surmounted a small flight of tiled steps. From each door bubbled a similar volume of smoke. Hose had been laid through each equally. There

was therefore nothing to distinguish the relative importance of these three doors as entrances to the fire itself. Flower glanced up at the dark façade that menaced above him. Perhaps some grouping of the ladders and the water-jets would provide him with a clue to the essential direction? But as he glanced up he thought: "At this point I can hardly deduce much. Such superficial evidences as I see now might easily mislead me from the very start. Hadn't I best rely on my intuition and enter impartially the door that most strongly beckons my open heart?"

Flower skirted the base of a mobile water-tower and doubled up the steps of the central portico.

But just as his boots slammed into the warm water that gushed out and down the steps, Flower heard cries behind him. Voices were calling to him and he turned round to see that two other firemen were running wildly towards him. Each carried a roll of hose and each beckoned to him with his free arm. Of course—they were his companions, his right-hand and left-hand men! In his urgency he had forgotten them! These were the two detailed to follow him wherever he should go. They were explicitly under his orders. Yet—now there seemed to be some sort of altercation! One of the men pointed to the door on the left, while the other gesticulated furiously to the right! Flower paused in doubt. True, he had forgotten about his companions. But that had been due only to the eagerness of his arrival. He knew quite well that he would have remembered them soon enough. This behaviour of theirs was most odd—he had never seen his companions disagree before. And surely they would hardly presume to question his own orders? Yet . . . there they were—quite plainly urging him from the door of his choice towards the other doors! However, since he had never had trouble with these two before it was now fairly easy for him to assert his will. He stared for a second into their panting moon faces and then, with a jerk of his shoulders, he motioned them abruptly to follow him up the steps to the portico. They followed without further objection. But as he plunged into the gathering smoke, Flower felt irritated that they had at least been able to sow within his decisive mind a momentary germ of doubt. Were his companions capable, if they exerted themselves, of controlling him?

The smoke in the vestibule was not thick, but nevertheless

it formed a solid, white blinding screen. It hung still, without wreathing. Flower felt as though a stipple of white pepper had been flung across his eyes. The pepper stung them and a charred smell began to scratch at his lungs. As he went further in, so the white veil enveloped him more completely, diffusing each feature of the vestibule's architecture, throwing over the whole a film of unreality, a distortion that exaggerated or diminished each object, so that the scene gradually assumed a submarine quality. The vestibule seemed drowned in deep white misted water whose surface lay somewhere far above. The sounds from outside were dimmed. Flower felt fogged and lost. Then suddenly he ducked, for trailing towards him he had glimpsed the long twin tails of a poisonous fish, thin tendons that hung straightly down and never wavered as they drifted swiftly forward. They seemed to drift so towards him because in the mist there was no measure by which he could distinguish his own movement from the static things that rushed towards him. The fish tails turned into torn electric cables: Flower crouched beneath them, watching carefully the open wires that might have charged his metal helmet.

The tiles were now awash with a good inch of warm black water that had poured down from the hoses above. Flower's boots sludged through it with a splashing that whispered dully beneath the bright cascade singing down the stairwell from the landings above. Flower wanted to find the stairwell. In that fog he could only begin to do this by following lines of hose that had already been laid down—in fact, by trusting in his ignorance to the instruction of other firemen, or at least by imitating their choice of direction. So he began kicking along the side of the submerged hose-lines with the flat of his boot, feeling his passage with his boots as a blind man feels with his stick. Then, suddenly, he tripped over the first step of the stairway.

This was the first step to the source of the fire. Hose laid down by other men had led Flower so far: and now his boots slipped on the watery exhaust of these men's efforts somewhere above. The wooden stairs ran with water. Blinded and coughing, slipping and lurching, with a hand searching for invisible banisters and a foot kicking against the upward hose, Flower forced his way up, wondering whether this stairway really led to the fire's source, whether

the men above had ever reached it, whether perhaps he was not putting too much trust in others. Yet, what else could he do? Nevertheless on the stairway the first glimmerings of doubt passed through his blinded, sweating, urgent body. Behind him, his two colleagues stamped their way up. They seemed content to follow him. They hardly spoke.

On the first landing Flower paused and tried hard to look through the wall of white smoke that clung at him. But now this had thickened, partly because of a vague light glowing somewhere behind it, a dull luminosity, dead yet with some sort of presence, the sluggish light of a pearl. It was this dead light, this duct of life and the denial of life that first impressed Flower with the true quality of the chaos into which he had ventured. There on the landing, with the warm water muddying his feet, with the plaster and lathes and wet wallpaper hanging loose, with all direction enveloped in a mist that swam with fearful vertigos of infinity—there on the landing Flower perceived the great disorder with which he had to strive. Or perhaps the realization came to him when he saw that the lines of hose had now divided and were proceeding each in a different direction. There had been two lines of hose. They had led him up the stairs together. But now one led away to the left and the other curved sharply and disappeared into the smoke a few feet to his diagonal right. Perhaps this material trouble might have impressed him the first. How can one tell surely whether it is the mental or after all the material that really moves one at such moments?

Sometimes the smoke cleared to reveal some object of the surrounding chaos, only to reclose around it almost before it could be properly registered by the eye and the mind; so that the object held no permanence, so that it seemed to have been only a flutter of the imagination, a half-remembered episode from the dreamed past. In this way Flower saw a sodden drape of flowered wallpaper hanging listless, dripping, torn from its old wall: and above it was now revealed a patch of the previous distemper. On this a game of noughts and crosses had been played in the scribbled pencil of days before the flowered wallpaper had been mounted. Flower saw in one corner a burnt out fire extinguisher, empty, its red paint blistered and blacked; in another corner lay a wet pile of plaster that had crumbled from the ceiling beneath the

weight of water on the floor above: a green curtain, torn and discoloured, lay rumpled on the floor like a drowned old woman: official papers, their ink dissolving, soaked up the water that swilled round a shattered clock: exploded panes of glass twinkled wickedly, as if hinting at the sharp new edges they concealed: and once Flower thought he saw a high white notice board, still untouched, still sternly announcing the regulations in a militant arrangement of heavy black types. As he perceived these things, Flower hesitated, for he realized then how many matters composed the fire.

His two colleagues were standing behind him, each still clasping tightly his precious roll of hose. They stared with growing interest at the floor where the lines of hose lay. One seemed to show a predilection for the left hand line, the other for the right. They seemed to be yearning after their chosen lines, gazing hard into the mist where the hose disappeared. Then the man on the right began to mutter to himself: instantly the other put his free hand forward and touched Flower lightly on the arm. At the very moment that Flower heard the muttering and felt the touch on his arm, his head wished to turn equally in both directions. And as if sensing this, both men made greater efforts to win his attention. The muttering soon grew into an agonized, shouted appeal as the man on the right danced around his chosen line in a most passionate exhortation. But to his left Flower felt the hand that had first touched him strengthen that touch sternly, so that the fingers tightened round his arm and almost dragged him in their direction.

What finally decided Flower to turn to the left? How can anyone say? Perhaps the physical pull weighed the more strongly on his indecision? Perhaps the gravity of the touch itself decided him? But in that case, what of the passionate appeal that came to his right ear? That too must have attracted him. Or perhaps it was neither of these that really decided his movement. Perhaps an object seen momentarily on the left had awakened some long-forgotten affection. Perhaps his left shoulder was built lower than his right, so that the equilibrium of his doubt was spun delicately off to the left. Possibly his real desire was to turn to the right, and then a deep-laid perversity had fought in him against accepting his true will. Perhaps an animal instinct sniffed danger to the right—or, itself reversed by his

spiritual temper, too much safety. Perhaps he had first turned to the left to say that he was going to the right—and had then lost his first resolve in the darkly flaming eyes of the colleague who held his arm. The complexities of intuition! Who can presume to say why he feels as he does? How lay down laws in a world where there are sunsets and the smell of boiling porridge? So many factors from everywhere combine to force each movement. No one motive can be said to decide. . . . But on that occasion Flower turned to the left.

Now he stumbled along what felt like a passage. Dimly he sensed the presence of walls close on either side. Once he caught sight of a darkstained skirting board through a drift of low smoke by his boot. So that to guide his way more securely he found the wall and felt along it with his left hand. His right hand fingered the cold brass nozzle that he had stuck in his belt. Behind him he could hear the heavy breathing of his comrades, the left and right-hand men of his crew; he never looked back; but he presumed that both his comrades were following, that the right-hand man, who had wanted to dance off in the opposite direction, had now subordinated his desire in sympathy with the common intention.

A draught of some sort was thinning away the smoke. The luminosity that had mooned behind the denser smoke cloud now began to assume form. It focussed itself into a perspective of reflections that grew brighter as they approached the far end of the passage, where apparently there was a source of fire. And there the nondescript lustre of light became red and vital.

The passage ended abruptly with a sharp turn to the right. Flower lurched round the corner and stopped dead. The smoke had quite cleared. A gust of warm air fanned his face. He stood on the doorless threshold of a huge vault, an immense and lofty room whose only limits were the distant shadows that curtained a large fire burning theatrically in the centre. There was a drop of some feet into the vault. Thus it seemed to Flower that he stood on the brink of a vast swimming bath, not because he could see water, but because he stood on the edge of what seemed a new venture.

Other hose lines from other passages joined Flower's guide line and poured over the threshold down into the vault.

They snaked along the floor towards the central fire, spreading out fanwise to surround it. A score or more firemen stood in a semi-circle round the fire and strained forward on their white poles of hose-water that dug about the tormented flames. Then, even in that second's hesitation on the brink of the vault, Flower noticed a most curious quality in the edifice of the fire. For—the structure of the vault itself was not burning! All that burnt was what appeared to be a small house built entirely within the vault. If it was not exactly a house, the erection that burnt consisted of a wall with windows—and as the firemen had flung up their ladders on its sides, and as they clambered aloft with other hoses, and as there appeared to be some sort of a white draped figure silhouetted in distress against the red glow that shaped one of the top floor windows—the whole edifice wore a traditional aspect of the house that is on fire. Flower wondered, too, at the precision with which the men were erecting and mounting the ladders, as if they were drilling by numbers. Once he thought he heard a drill number echo back from the yet distant fire.

A fireman came doubling neatly towards the doorway. His nimble feet stepped precisely between the snakes of hose. As he came nearer, Flower saw that he seemed hardly out of breath. A fireman fighting a fire—yet with tunic still dry, his face yet unblackened by the smoke, his breath regular and unstrained? Where was the urgency, the dangerous tension? "Hullo, you," said the fireman amiably as he came level with Flower and his two companions. "Coming down? We can always use another crew—though of course everything's quite under control already, well under control."

Flower pointed wildly at the figure in the top floor window. "Under control?" he shouted. "How in the hell can you say 'under control' with a woman still aloft there and the flames at her? Are you crazy?"

The new fireman appeared unruffled by Flower's show of excitement. He even smiled, showing two regular rows of false and pelleted teeth. His calm grey eyes looked from one to the other of the three, and finally found in the man on Flower's left an answering glance of understanding. So that he smiled knowingly with this man—the left-hand man who had led Flower in the direction of the vault—and at the same time spoke, in a soft, didactic tone: "But the men are

climbing up to her. They know their job. Numbers three and four will ascend to the ledge. Number three will carry the woman down. It has all been arranged."

"And I suppose you've arranged the flames, too? And the heat? The way of the wind?"

The fireman's placid smile broadened. He spoke to Flower as though Flower were a dense child who had nevertheless stumbled upon an obstacle of truth. "Yes, things of course might go wrong," he said, neatly running a pink tongue over the polished conches of his teeth, caressing fondly their ordered achievement, "but that is always so. We cannot think to control what is beyond our sphere of command. However, up to that point they have worked out for us an excellent routine, with which we have always been satisfied, which has in the past proved its worth, and which for these reasons is beyond question. Naturally we never question such a routine. We take things calmly and we don't stretch out to grasp beyond what they say is right for us."

Flower found this new fireman's voice strangely soothing. What he said sounded reasonable enough. And he spoke with a reassuring certainty. He spoke calmly, almost complacently: but there was nothing pompous in his tone. This man carried in his voice most sincerely a conviction that he was content with the limited and ordered sphere to which he had become so accustomed. Flower began to find solace in the man's beautifully even teeth, in his clear grey eyes, in the clean set of his neck. "Won't you come down nearer and see for yourself, join in with us?" smiled the fireman.

As soon as this invitation had been given, the graver of Flower's two companions jumped the odd few feet down into the vault. As the man jumped, Flower's foot paused. He had intended to jump too. The fire and the method of fighting it had somehow soothed the urgency of his questing. He felt that here was a haven from his doubts. But then . . . this man of his had jumped without waiting for Flower's order! Flower paused. What had happened? Was this companion of his trying to force his direction again? Had he, Flower, no purer driving power beyond this man's whim? He looked down into the pleasant face of the new fireman, who still smiled and motioned with his comfortable hand towards the burning house. But the spell was half-broken

and Flower said, "Are you sure this is the seat of the fire? Is this edifice the true kernel?"

The fireman smiled quietly at his polished boots. "They say so—what more could you want?"

Flower gasped, repeated the words to himself, digested with amazement their message—and reached down to grasp hold of the collar of the man who had jumped. "Come back!" he cried, instantly, "we're going the other way." As he tugged at the man's collar and lapel all his first fierce doubts flew back. "They say so!" Indeed! And what kind of a story-book fire had he momentarily conceived to be the real kernel of things? Certainly it had looked like a fire, the real fire. But now it was clear that it had only appeared so because he had always imagined that kind of a fire. He had no evidence in his feelings and in his creative, enquiring self that proved in any way that this was the true kernel of the fire. What he had seen was only the traditional fire of hearsay. And he had almost succumbed to its seduction! For it had momentarily overwhelmed him with its implications of rest, security, and freedom from doubt. Now, thankfully, Flower saw for the first time that freedom from doubt has nothing whatsoever to do with pure freedom. Freedom from doubt, the greatest deception of all! Flower heaved his companion up onto the threshold, turned him round, and trudged back into the smoke again, pushing the man before him.

Flower had no wish to retrace his previous path. Instead he followed a random line of hose that led up a narrow flight of rough-wood stairs. The stairway wound spirally and soon the fireglow from below had vanished. Flower and his companions ascended in the dark. The effort of the climb forced them to breathe more deeply, so that soon they were all three coughing as the acrid smoke kicked into their lungs. By now the water that had rained down each stairwell had begun to soak through their heavy fire tunics. Water dripped through their scarves, under their collars, down their backs, until it swilled their closest underclothing, and below that, until it accumulated and mounted within the rubber of their boots. The smoke had blackened their faces. They looked like three storm-sodden coons—yet this appearance was belied by the robot equipment that armoured them. Perhaps finally they most nearly resembled a crew of deep sea divers,

lumbering heavily forward, slowed by the weight of their equipment yet carried on the momentum of that weight, with dream faces blacked of all expression, with outstretched hands prying into the submarine darkness. None of them knew what lay above. Up and up, stair after stair they stamped with their heavy boots—until they saw above them the first glimmerings of a new light. It was a peculiar light, iridescent—mostly very white but interspersed with beams of pinkish orange and livid blue. It flickered over their helmets and buttons like the rotating spotlight that colours the dancers in a waltzing ballroom. It jazzed them up. Flower stepped out of the last spiral turn onto a short landing.

The light shone from a gap in two half-open fireproof doors. The doors were of steel, roughly painted red, and through a fissure between them there trailed several hoses. There was apparently fire beyond the doors: but what fire could reflect such peculiar colours? And—Flower sniffed the air with sudden interest—what was this rich new smell? This was a different smell from the dry sickening stench of burning plaster and disintegration. This was a rich and friendly smell. It brought with it confused memories. Could this then be the seat of the fire?

Flower flung himself forward at the steel doors. He wedged his arm between them and forced them further apart. He stumbled forward between them. He missed his footing and fell forward into the light.

Flower dropped six or eight feet down towards a brightly polished floor. Even in the fractional second of his falling he noticed sharply the texture of the floor he was to hit. He noticed how hard it looked, how it shone with the lustre of tough ivory. Then he dropped right through the floor and sank softly into water. It was not more than a few feet deep. Flower struggled onto his legs again and found himself nearly waist high in warm water surfaced with a thick white foam. It was this foam of polished little bubbles that had reminded him of a stone floor during the moment of his fall. As he struggled upright his two companions splashed down to either side of him. Only this time it was the right-hand man who jumped first. He had jumped down without hesitation, almost hilariously—while Flower noted from the sound of the second splash that the left-hand man had paused before he had followed.

They stood in a long low room whose furthest wall was well alight. It seemed to be a room for housing goods. Crates and wooden cases rose like islands from the foam. The foam—white and brilliant—expanded softly over the whole area of the room: so that the room was plainly flooded waist-high with water that had poured back from the fire. The water was warm and in no way unpleasant. Flower felt that this was like a most luxurious bath beyond all his dreams. In a sense, it was exhilarating. He looked at his two black-faced companions and laughed to see them half immersed in the immaculate foam. This was the first time that Flower had laughed: he caught himself in the middle of his laugh, frowned, wondered how he could be taking the situation so lightly—and peered with greater curiosity around him.

One of the crates nearest him had burst open. He saw now that it was filled with soap. That explained the foam. And another crate was filled with little bottles. One of these little bottles came floating towards him on the slow backstream of water. It glinted lasciviously as it bobbed and swayed on the foam. Flower grasped and read its label—"My Own." A scent bottle!

Sometimes when one of the senses is suddenly and overwhelmingly occupied, the other senses hang back on their perception. A man may awake in the strong sunlight at just the same time that a nearby gun is fired; he may for a few seconds perceive only the strength of the sunlight, so that he hears no more than the echo of the gunfire, completely overstepping the experience of its immediate explosion. It was like this with Flower. He had fallen into these new textures of light and water—and so fierce had been their impact that he had not perceived an overwhelming smell that clouded this new room. But as soon as he had read the label, his brain called for a message from his nose. He sniffed deeply—and then he swayed back, as though a heavy curtain had been thrown upon him.

He thought . . . perfumed gas? His brain pumped madly against the odorous blow. Smell pounded through his arteries, whirling his equilibrium, blinding him to all direction. Yet even in that first moment his senses thrummed alive with a great ecstasy—for this was an immense and wonderful perfume that drowned the air. Perfume that came not from one bottle, but from hundreds of little glinting bottles that

had been burst by the fire and were now throwing out swiftly the vapour of their hot essences. Flower tried to shake his head clear. He tried to think—"This is a fire. I have been to fires and I know that the world is somersaulted at a fire. Everything can happen. The ground may swill with molten rubber so that firemen are stuck like flies on flypaper. Dead grain married to hosewater may live again and move—the little wheat sperms may bring huge buildings crashing down around them. Towering walls move silently towards you, animated in the tall night sky. And now—I am just mixed up in a fire in a perfume warehouse. Nevertheless . . ." He peered around him.

He saw that other cases were packed with other cosmetics, wooden cases through whose split sides the little pink boxes were pushing out, each spitting its fragrant gas, throwing up its spray of powder, letting dribble its melting soap into the great foam bath. He saw that the fire was confined to the very end of the long room, so that its reddish light came flickering over all the billowing carpet of foam that stretched towards him. And the glow paled to pink and sometimes to a bright yellow as it fled further from the fire itself. He saw that the left side of the fire burnt with pale blue flames. A high row of cases had caught alight, and from these dripped a spirit that rained down now in a bright waterfall, blue as a butterfly's wing, flaming blue as the wicked flames on a Christmas cake. These blue flames threw a long blue beam across the foam whenever, for a moment, they flared brighter. As before Flower saw that there were firemen already at work on the fire. They stood in a circle very near the fire. There was something festive about their appearance, for they stood waist-high in wet brilliant foam, spangled with bright colour, revellers drifting and sinking and swaying in a liquid down of perfumed sherbert that caressed their shining thighs.

Flower himself began to wade towards the firelight. Somewhere deep beneath the foam he heard water swilling round his sunken boots. His two companions followed him. One of them had begun to sing a little song. This one almost waltzed as he pressed forward. But the other man remained grave, though it was apparent that he too was beginning to yield to the atmosphere of this place, for a pathetic bewilderment was already softening the rigid lines that were so deeply engraved on his face. Flower wanted suddenly to sink back

on the foam and float slowly towards the fire. He wanted to drink the perfumed colour and to lie on it.

It was extraordinary that the first fireman they met seemed to recognize them immediately. "Why, it's Flower," he said, "Flower and a couple of friends!" He swung his hose in a circle so that the water feathered out into a fine spray of water drops that caught the colours of the fire. The spray hung for an instant in the air like a screen of jewels. "I'm so glad you were able to come," the fireman continued, smiling quite lazily with lids a little lowered over his brown eyes. "It's exquisite here, don't you think?"

Flower smiled his reply, although he had never seen this young man before. But it was pleasant to be recognized and addressed by his name. Also he was becoming drunk. There were spirit fumes in the air. The air was drowsy and weighted with them. Flower felt that he had never before been so happy. The colour, the perfume, the warmth of the foam, the heady fumes, the lightness of his body, and—how bright and pleasant everyone seemed to be! He noticed that all the firefighters were smiling, laughing, humming, talking in high spirits, joking. Some were even dancing. Others, overcome, had lain back on the foam and were almost sleeping, their jets still playing on the fire, drowsed and beautiful smiles lingering on their lips. Now and again overheated bottles burst with a loud pop.

"Like machine guns!" laughed Flower.

"Like champagne corks!" said the fireman.

"Like big champagne corks!" laughed Flower, almost singing.

The fireman motioned to one side, "Want a drink?" he asked.

Flower looked and saw that the fireman had pointed towards a small case of brandy that stood high and dry on an island of cases. It was almost as though the brandy stood on a prepared table. Flower's right-hand companion had already taken up a bottle and was handing it round with great enthusiasm. Flower took a drink and sank back onto the foam.

As he floated, the scene slowed down. Now he could reflect at his leisure. His thoughts drifted this way and that. They touched on a colour here, a drift of perfume there. He never thought of one thing for very long. Once, for a

moment, these pleasing dreams were interrupted by a reflection that he was somewhere on the second floor of the building and that no floor could possibly bear for long the terrific weight of water that had accumulated. The floor must surely sag and break! Perhaps even now there were firemen beneath, spiking the ceiling with their long hooks so that the water should be released! But this idea soon fled beneath the pressure of pleasure. "How should I mind if it does collapse?" smiled Flower to himself, and then he began to think of the other firemen around him. Really, he thought, there is much to be said for the titivation of the senses. How often liberty of the senses is thought finally to muffle the soul! Yet here there are delicate sensations that arouse in me what feels very much like a spiritual exhilaration. I am elated. Can sensuality, after all, be no forlorn dead-end, but instead a highway from which great things may be obtained? They say—"Food, a roof and a mate—only with these provided can one be free to start thinking on aware planes." In that case, possibly the finer the roof, the sweeter the food, the subtler the mate—possibly these refinements may stimulate rather than divert? And perhaps, conversely, the ascetic's abnegation is the greatest diversion after all? Can the spirit really be separate from animal desire? Is there truly a private sphere for the brain? Analyse the motives of all disinterested thought and you will finally suspect a selfish beginning, for the spirit is perceived only through the brain, the brain is primarily in service to the senses, and the senses are machines for animal survival. Is this the journey—or should one somewhere draw an arbitrary line and say: "Here begins the spirit"?

Flower raised his head and looked at the faces that smiled out of the fireglow around him. The eyes, the lips, the rhythms of gregarious movement were all charged with pleasing gaiety. Surely all these smiles were not to be discounted as part of an endless superficiality? These people were wholly sensual; yet was there not an enthusiasm and a love of it in them that was surely good?

Flower looked up at his new friend, the fireman with the brown eyes, gazing with some sort of a contented rapture into the man's smiling face, "So this is the seat of the fire," he said.

But at this the smile dimmed and the man's eyes flicked

quickly to one side, almost as though he were searching for something.

Flower scrambled to his feet. He beat his head to free himself from the fumes. He screwed his forehead into a frown of urgent concentration. He gazed sharply at the faces around him. And then he realized that between the smiles, beneath the enthusiasm there lay in these faces an uncertainty. Now and then a smile would fade and the face would seem to search. Flower saw suddenly that this search was limited to the surrounding scene. It was a search for nothing outside the perfumed room. Whatever they desired could only lie within the foam—and this was exhaustible. Flower waved his arms to his companions and ploughed swiftly away from the fire. The foam surged round him, trying to hold him back. But he thrashed on towards the cold door through which he had entered, and as he approached it he noticed with gratitude a rusted iron derrick that jutted from the wall by the raised doorway. No foam had touched the derrick: it was old, made of hard iron, and it was a machine that worked.

Although he had almost to push his right-hand man, Flower climbed up to the doorway and, without once glancing behind, flung himself into the darkness and smoke of the old landing.

The smoke was thinning. Now they could see that the landing served as a threshold to a long corridor. From where he stood, Flower could not exactly determine the end of the corridor: but as he peered through the mist it seemed to him that far along, past innumerable doors, there stood a tall mirror. He could not be quite certain of the mirror—so that in effect the corridor was still indeterminate. Nevertheless, without pausing to consider his direction, Flower started up the corridor. He said to himself, "That's twice I've been nearly mistaken about the seat of this fire. Am I too easily led? Or is the appearance of things at first so persuasive that it deceives each man? Still . . . I must be careful. Now I know I must reject more perhaps than I wish." And he quickened his pace as the urgency of his search blew more fiercely through his veins.

The corridor was lit by intermittent patches of fireglow. It appeared that several rooms along each side were on fire. Through their open doors there flickered flames reflected from

within. The corridor was bare, uncarpeted. A little water sluiced into pools here and there ; but its comparative scarcity showed that little fire fighting had been thought necessary. However, Flower determined to examine each of the rooms. Perhaps an error had been made ? Who knew but that other firemen might have passed the seat of the fire without recognizing it ! This might be so ! Flower doubled through a shaft of fireglow into the nearest room.

In one corner an office desk was on fire. Flames were creeping up the curtain. At first it seemed that this would set the entire room alight : but after his first apprehension, Flower saw that this was only a very small fire that would lead nowhere. It was plainly restricted. Even as he thought this the curtain collapsed and fell across the desk, completely muffling the fire. Grey moonlight flooded through the window as the reddish glow snapped out : only a petulant cloud of smoke marked the fire that had defeated itself.

Flower turned into the corridor again. He ran on past several empty rooms. As he passed them he saw the blue squares of light that marked the bright night outside. These empty rooms were distinguished by a quiet radiance. They were deserted rooms, and lit only by the moon—so that they should have appeared lifeless : but not one of these was so barren of life as any of the rooms that were on fire. Flower understood this as he turned into the next firelit room. Here there was a great flickering of fire : little short flames were playing along the friezes, the skirting boards, and the framework surrounding decorative panels. They ran along the woodwork, searching for their food, found some and flared : found none, and spluttered out : then they reappeared again some few feet away—almost as though they had travelled invisibly within the woodwork itself. There was a continual movement. At first this gave the impression of intense life. But soon it became apparent that here was a dry corruption beyond even death. Flower thought—yes, fire is a barren element. Its life is false. Everything it touches must die. It is hot, dry, parched, and so automatically ruthless that no living character can be imagined to provoke its motion. Compared with the bite of fire, the eyeless munching of a dinosaur seems thoughtful and tender. Compared with the horrid disintegration of fire, Flower thought, dry rot is wet and pleasant,

He raised his head and saw that little flames were running along the lintel a foot above his helmet. Then they came haring down the sides of the door, so that Flower soon stood in a frame of light fire. The woodwork flickered like the skeleton of a pyrotechnic display piece. It grew warm, but Flower stood there some moments longer. An odd paradox, he was thinking—I have just discovered the essential aridity of fire, and yet it seems to me that the attitude of a fireman to fire is very like the attitude of a swimmer to water. Before being thrown into the pool for the first time, the swimmer hesitates in his distrust of the watery element that lies in wait for him: but after he has paddled a few strokes, he begins to feel his control of the water. It swirls around him, it clings to him, it invites him to sink—but still it is he who with a turn of the body has the final control. So it is with the fireman and fire. At first the idea of flame terrifies him. It is a frightening element, cruel, mysterious, quick, merciless, unpredictable. And yet, after he has walked into the fire with his hose, after he has seen the red fire blacken beneath the weight of his hosewater, after he has felt himself smashing the flames—then he knows that it is he who is in control and he kicks about the dry fire like a swimmer in water. He knows his element.

Flower moved from the doorway and started off along the corridor. What he had seen in these rooms could not have been more than a very minor offshoot of the main fire. He passed several other rooms where the flames invited but proved finally of no dimension. He thought: "These little offshoots of the fire are most deceptive. They are like certain freak ideas and barren philosophies that in their novelty intrigue and seduce but never finally satisfy. These are the hundred acrobatic ways out that lead nowhere."

Then he grew impatient and began to run as fast as his boots would let him. These rooms could not be interminable! Soon something was bound to happen. Suddenly he saw another fireman flying towards him—a dark shape helmeted, with buttons aflash in the glow. He stopped dead . . . a few feet away from the mirror. He saw the ghost of himself standing in the bare corridor. Behind him stretched a long vista with its patches of deceptive light. In front the reflection of his past masqueraded as the darkling ghost of the future. In the old mirror greyly he saw himself—and in

desperation he spun round and rushed through the nearest door.

The room was moonlit and deserted. A large wardrobe stood at the further end. Flower hurled himself at it, tearing at a large mahogany knob. As the door opened, a gust of smoke curled out. Flower plunged into the close darkness. He snapped on his flashlight. Something hung down in front of him, something soft, hanging slackly from a hook. A solitary fur coat hanging in the wardrobe, moth-eaten and edged with green mould. A dead thing, its lifeless arms dangling, staring at him with no eyes. Flower thought wildly—where is the head? Then—he realized.

A thin spiral of smoke issued from its collar. Flower reached back for his axe. Never taking his eyes off the coat he swung the axe and began cutting furiously at the hanging fur. For a while he lost all reason, all sense of time. Breathlessly he hacked and twisted in the dark. The close air flew with gusts of fur. Then—the coat fell to the floor. But Flower went on hacking—until he had cut through the back of the wardrobe itself. As the wood splintered apart he saw that there was a room beyond. The wardrobe must have been placed in front of a doorway. As Flower stepped through the opening—an old friend rose from his chair and came walking across the carpet towards him with outstretched hand.

"Hello at last," he said, amiably, lazily, as though he had been expecting Flower. "I'm sorry about the smoke. Don't worry about it. I think the wind's blowing down the chimney—quite a regular cloud of the stuff puffed out at me just now. It's a rotten grate. But I'm forgetting . . . sit down. You're wet." He turned towards the fireplace where a fine yellow fire blazed over the neat coals. He motioned Flower casually to a chair. But Flower stood still.

"Don't you know what's happening?" he cried. "Don't you know about the fire?"

His old friend was fingering pipe and tobacco bowl. He could not have heard what Flower had said. "A nice quiet pipe together," he was mumbling, at leisure, fussing a little, his slippered feet dawdling about the warm Turkey rug. "Remember this bowl? It belonged to your father. There used to be another, but I think he broke it a long time ago . . ."

Flower found himself saying: "That was the day we came back from Winchester, when Hilda jumped with terror at the thunder. Her big paws . . ." Then he pulled himself up. "But the fire! The fire! What are you doing about it—what are you doing here anyway? Do you live here—in a warehouse?"

"Your Virgil and the three French grammars—here they are on the mantelpiece." Was his old friend deaf? Flower could see that he had grown older. His hair was grey, the twinkle in his eyes seemed to have receded behind a tired film of experience. Yet the brightness was still there, far behind. He had picked up one of the French grammars, a faded red book, with the long dry rain splashes from the past still streaking its gloss. "Look on the flyleaf," his old friend said. "Remember Batsby's writing?"

Flower tried to shout, "Pull yourself together, man. The building's on fire! On fire, d'you hear!" But his old friend continued placidly to turn the leaves of the grammar.

It was a still room. Dark plush curtains hung from a brass curtain rod over the window. On heavy wooden rings they had been drawn across to drown all sound from outside. The wallpaper seemed to be flowered, perhaps in red on a background of deep brown. In the centre of the room stood a wide round table covered with a green plush cloth. Books, a microscope, rulers, a tea-cosy and a Toby jug littered the inkstained plush. At each side of the fire waited black leather armchairs, leaning a little on tired castors. A single light, shaded green, hung down over the table, illuminating it brightly like the light over a billiards cloth. Beyond the firelight, beyond the armchairs and the turkey rug, the room lay back in shadow. Flower could see dimly that there were bookcases, and somewhere a white plaster head. The firelight flickered, but that one electric light shone steadily. He could almost hear the steadiness with which it shone. His old friend continued to rustle the leaves of the grammar. A beetle ticked somewhere behind the wainscot. No other sound.

Then, just as Flower noticed that his mother's fawn sewing bag was hanging from the arm of one of the chairs, his old friend began to speak. Slowly, reflectively, with a comforting kindly tranquillity, perhaps a little sadly, he began to recount the story of a picnic they had enjoyed on a yellow summer's

afternoon long ago. "Mavis, Angela, Bunny and you and me—oh, and of course big Hilda," he said. "I think we'd left little Hilda chasing her tail in the scullery. We went out to the brook underneath the aqueduct. The fields were green and thick with buttercups. We found a place where the cows hadn't been—and then—do you remember wondering if we dared bathe? I think it was Bunny went in first—and then the girls turned away and counted the poplars on Cobbet's hill while we put on our shorts. Then the splashing, and the wasps, and the fish paste sandwiches. . . ." Flower was walking slowly towards the empty armchair. His old friend's voice and the memory of that lost afternoon soothed him, made him feel almost sleepy. Or was the afternoon lost? Perhaps even now it was returning? The photograph was brilliantly clear, a bright circle of summer yellow framed by the grey mists of memory. He lowered himself into the armchair. Chalmers—Stephen Chalmers—Stevy—that was his friend's name—and there over by the table was the old silver teapot and Granny's crochet doily. It smelt of bath olivers—bath olivers, varnish and stale apples. Flower leaned back in the armchair. His eyes gradually closed as the fire warmed the left side of his trousers and a familiar draught began to chill his shoulder. He nestled his shoulder further into the chair, and felt the warmth creeping over him.

Even though his mood was drowsy and still, Flower's heart was beating fast. He loved the contact of these old things. He yearned towards them, so that a lump of tenderness seemed to form and dissolve in his throat, somewhere behind his eyes. Thus he let himself sink willingly away into the friendly past. Yet, while sinking, he found himself wondering why this nostalgia should affect him so strongly. Was he yearning for the safety of the cradle, where he imagined the world unquestioning, cosy, unaggressive? Was this deep-seated longing thence projected into all old things, into entire periods? A sense of security lay about these pictures of the past, for there was no doubt about what *had* happened, there was no chance. The past was more real than the present because the picture was clearly defined. It was secure, rounded off, a complete picture that was finished and which he knew nothing could now alter: nothing like the unstable present, which one could hardly understand at all. Then he began to muse on his love of what he considered the elegance

and the romance of days gone by. Was this elegance real? Or was it instead a complement lavished by his longing? It was peculiar, he thought, that whenever he imagined a church parade in Victoria's Hyde Park, or a fête champêtre at Fontainebleau, or the frigate quays at Chatham—that always he saw these scenes through the eyes of himself as a child. A spectator, he never joined in the scenes with adult desires. He was small, he stood little against the high iron railings, he looked up, always up.

Flower lolled further back in the chair. “. . . and Bunny caught a blue dragonfly. I remember he gave it to Mavis—and Mavis hung on to his arm all the way home because of it. I remember how jealous you were, how you were nearly crying because you wanted Mavis to be your sweetheart and you were ashamed of your knock knees too . . .” As his old friend talked, Flower said to himself: “The schooldays are the happiest after all. Then your terrors are all personal and there is always the hope, no, the certainty, that one day your problems will be solved: but later your terrors embrace the whole idea of life, and then you fear that perhaps there is no solution, no reason at all. Perhaps the past is the only real experience. One wishes to envisage the future: one cannot: one casts around for a substitute: one substitutes the picture of the past, sufficiently alien from the present, a vision—yet one that can be controlled.” He shook his head, blinked his eyes. “I am making things up,” he said to himself, “I am trying to make excuses. Do I really believe this? Then what do I believe? Ah—I think—I think I believe in the truth of virgin experience. That only once in our lives do we taste, smell, hear, see a thing—the first time. After that, what we imagine to be a recurrence of sensation is really a memory of the first experience; or, of the first time that the taste, smell, sound, sight was fully experienced. That is why the past calls so strongly. That is why the first smells of the changing seasons will always sadden me. Because once I smelt them or once I read of them in a book long ago.

“If the past is the only reality, then perhaps I must return to the past. I must relive that first adventure. I know a lady who so treasures one time of her life, when she was maiden, when he proposed to her, before he went away—that for her time stopped; and now that she is old she still wears her same feathered hat of that treasured time, still

grets her coachman on warm mornings, still watches the afternoon sun slant through a lowered blind to lose itself in the lavender dusk that quiets her china and the tapestried music-stool.

"Perhaps there in the comfortable grate is the seat of the fire for which I have been searching. How sure I am of that fire! How secure it is, how well I know those yellow flames, those good glossy coals! Perhaps this is the seat of the fire, and sparks are curling up the chimney, igniting above and below the great conflagration I have entered."

Just then Flower's helmet fell forward over his face! It fell forward over his face, blacking out the scene, neutralizing the smells with its lining of oiled leather clinging firmly as a mask by its chin strap. True, Flower had started to shake his head again. Thus the action itself had partly caused the helmet to fall over his face. But it seemed also that a ridiculous stroke of chance had jogged the helmet. So now he sat there in the dark, the room had disappeared, his old friend had stopped talking, and he could no longer smell the reminiscent smells. Since his eyes were blinded, his sense of touch became instantly more active, so that now he felt strongly the shape of the locket that hung round his neck and beneath his vest. In the locket lay a picture of the girl he was going to marry. Joan was twenty, slimly muscular, blue-eyed, deeply tanned by the wind and the sun. Her chin smiled cleanly forward; as she walked her eyes and her raised face seemed to greet always some future horizon. There was a freshness of the future about her. Flower sat bolt upright, peering wildly into his leathern darkness.

Now he spoke aloud. Muffled from within his mask, the dull, felted words were absorbed by the stillness and the plush of the exterior room. Yet they persisted with a new urgency. Flower was no longer drowsy. "The past! That eiderdown!"—now he was shouting within the helmet—"Pink patchouli and the odious whalebone—how could I love these when there are Joan's fresh cheeks, Joan's clean sunbed? That is the struggle, though . . . the wrestling of security with hope, of the womb with the bright dirigible, of safety with the will to create!" He raised his shout to a shriek, a shriek that was strong and musical. "Is this—is this," he cried high, "the seat of the fire? Is it?"

From inside the helmet he heard the amiable words of his

old friend ; " The seat of the fire ? " And then a quiet, kindly laugh, " No—rather . . . a seat by the fire." Flower understood. He warmed again towards his old friend and his atmosphere. He valued the unassuming manner, the humble confidence with which his old friend had delivered his conscious pun. It was his way. So that now Flower put up his hands and tore free the helmet, jumping to his feet, smiling at the grey-haired man opposite him. " Come on," he said, " I've got to go ahead—but you must come with me ! I see that much. I know now that I can't go alone ! "

Chalmers nodded and lifted himself from the chair. His hand drew from the shadows an old mackintosh. " By the way," he said, " where are your companions ? "

For the first time Flower realized that his companions had remained outside the room. Together he and Chalmers went across the carpet and through the wardrobe. As they passed out into the empty room, the air sharpened. Faint acrid smells of distant burning and disintegration excited the air. A transparent drift of smoke curled in from the passage outside. Now the air was alive again with quiet dangers. Instinctively Flower made for the side of the room. He knew that if the floor had been weakened it would be safer near the wall. The boards were black with a slush of wet dust. The doorway was a dim rectangle of smoke-thinned fireglow, unwavering, flat. Chalmers followed, a drab shadow in his old mackintosh.

Flower's companions were waiting in the corridor, shoulder to shoulder, patient and without expression. As he approached they nudged each other, and their peculiar moonlike faces seemed slowly to brighten. It was plain that without Flower they had taken no action whatsoever. But now they lifted up their rolls of hoses again, and once more each began to suggest, with pointing fingers and tossings of their heads, that Flower should take a different direction. Flower stood before them, undecided. And then he turned to where the mirror had been. The mirror had gone.

He sprang forward to touch the space that should have been his reflection. Nothing there. The corridor seemed to continue as before. He glanced at the ceiling. There were no marks to show where the gilt frame of the mirror might have been fixed. A terrible uncertainty overcame him. His head grew huge and wildly alert, thrumming with terror, with

all the dark fright of the moment when, waking from a nightmare, you must reconcile with reality the vivid remembrance of the dream. During that moment the nightmare seems preferable to reality. There is an ennui about the solid bedroom whose furniture has remained awake and sceptical. An episode, horrible though it was, has been stolen from your experience. You feel cheated. Flower tried to shake off the persisting unreality. Had the mirror been there? Had he projected the mirror from his imagination? Or even now was he really remembering a mirror he had seen perhaps many years ago, connecting this somehow with the corridor, so that he felt that only a short while ago he had really seen the mirror there? Yet, while he was considering these possible explanations, he knew—as one always knows, with conviction—that the mirror had been there all the time.

He led his three companions through the space where the mirror should have been. There was a door with a push-bar to the left. He crashed it open and stepped out onto a grilled iron platform. An iron staircase zigzagged away beneath him. He was outside the building. The roar of pumps hundreds of feet beneath surged up through the diffident night air. It was busy below. He could distinguish the midget pumps as their brasswork flashed in the orange glow. Around them stretched an interminable mess of winding hoses, hastily erected watertanks, running firemen. Flower was up high on a theatre gallery, presiding over a massed performance of puppets illuminated only by the fire's vast circular spotlight. The fire boiled somewhere inside the building and beneath him. Sometimes it flickered greatly—and with the boiling and the hissing and the crackling resounding up those sheer walls, Flower knew fearfully that beneath him there was in progress an immense movement like the movement that whirls unseen behind the windows of a ballroom; and that within that movement there was compressed a giant power, intangible and dangerous as the potential that thrums to escape through the violet doors of an electric power station.

Up on the platform he was alone with the height. The dark wall stretched dizzily down. It spread flatly to either side. It rose towering above him. It was cruelly flat, offering no perceptible foothold but the little iron platform upon which he stood. He clung hard to the thin railing, trying not to think of the height, wishing dangerously to throw

himself out into the space. A mobile steel ladder roared up towards him, extending swiftly like the neck of a lusting reptile, rolling out the muscular tension within itself, surging upwards, straining its steel length. It came to a halt away to the left below him. Flower tried to shout to the man who stood on the ladder's top platform. "You'll never get to the fire from the outside—not to the seat of it! You'll never . . ." But his voice was lost in the roar of the pumps and the distance of the blue night above. He looked away and up. All the highest storeys still lay heavily on top of him. Flame outlined two or three sets of windows. As he looked up, the desolate weight of brick and its solitude at that great height swept Flower with an even headier vertigo than before. But the more unnerved and lost he became the greater was his need to search. He was the more determined to search higher and ever higher for the seat of the fire.

He flung himself back into the corridor. His companions were waiting patiently. Now Flower felt like a child left alone in an empty house. He had climbed to the upstairs rooms that had never before been explored. Behind each door, along each landing, up each secret little flight of stairs lay all the dangers, the terrors, the rich new wonders of silent, dusty rooms that waited in the half-light. Flower felt, like the child, that above him waited the incredible. Like a child, the sphere of his own experience was insufficient: he sensed further possibilities. He turned sharply out of the corridor into a recessed staircase. The steps spiralled closely round a steep central well. Flower could not see the bottom of this well. He could not see the top of the stairway. In the dark his flashlamp threw a white circle over the steps in front of him. He heard the panting of his companions as they heaved their hose behind in the dark. And, somewhere further down, the faint rustle of Chalmers' mackintosh.

The stairs ended abruptly. Heavy iron fireproof doors faced him. The scarlet mushroom of an alarmbell sprouted from the wall above. A notice said—"DANGER." Flower wrenched at the dropbolt. Straining heavily he swung the doors open. A blast of heat whipped across his face. He lowered his head against it. Then he pushed himself forward.

A furnace glare blinded him. For the first few seconds it appeared to him that he was involved in a fluid abstraction of hot golden light and sharply defined black masses. He

kept his helmet lowered against the fierce glare and, accustoming himself to these difficult conditions, coughed heat out of his lungs. Then gradually he found that he was standing on what was probably a raised causeway. A few feet away the crumbling brick dropped away—to what might have been a deep basin, a spacious arena. An iron railing leant over the edge of the brick. Now definite shapes were evolving from the abstract pattern. He saw that two immense kilns predominated the basin. Silhouetted blackly against the fire beyond, they themselves were on fire inside, so that gusts of dark smoke blew from their lateral doors and from their volcanic summits. Flower saw that there were firemen working high up on iron balconies that encircled the upper reaches of these two monstrous shapes. He saw them struggling with their hoses, black robots against the flames they fought, appearing and disappearing as the smoke and steam swirled round them. Water that poured ceaselessly down the brick walls caught the light and emphasized their solid rotundity. As it reached the floor it threw up clouds of white steam, for the basin was hot with burning debris. Flower glanced to either side of the kilns. Gaunt erections of twisted iron rose from the fire. Machines of strange device, great embattled cogwheels, lifeless pistons, curved shapes of roughcast metal, stanchions, rods, the immense cylinders of two riveted boilers—they rose from the fire, they clung to walls, they hung down on chains from the smoke clouds that muffled the ceiling. Slender iron pillars rose at intervals towards the ceiling. Wherever Flower looked—from the thick nest of pipes running along the wall to the derricks that swung from the kilns themselves—he saw monsters worked in heavy iron. And clambering over them, dragging their waterweighted hoses, standing out against the glare, disappearing into the darkness, Flower saw his fellow firemen. The great fire waved its shadows violently over all the scene. Firemen worked as though enfevered. Smoke curled out in fantastic clouds. The white steam spat. From a hissing and a cracking the noises of burning would undulate into a sudden flaming crescendo that sounded like a high wind. Smell blew over in thick nauseous gusts, retreated, then blew in again with redoubled strength. There was movement everywhere. Flower yelled over his shoulder to his companions. They came stamping towards him. "Get to

work!" he yelled. "I've got it—I've found the seat of the fire!"

Still shouting he ran along the side of the causeway. He found the top rung of an iron ladder and swung himself over the side. Hand over hand, his boots stamping at the iron rungs, he climbed down and dropped at last into the fire. He felt invulnerable in his heavy uniform with its thick oilskin leggings. At the foot of the ladder he kicked aside a heap of embers. Flower saw that he could zigzag a way through the piles of fired debris. He looked up and saw that his companions were lowering him a length of hose. The brass coupling swung towards him. As he caught it, the clumsy metal bruised him. He tore off the lowering rope, yelled up for more hose. As the stuff uncoiled down towards him, the faces of his companions wreathed in smoke peered over from the brick causeway above. Curiously, this time they seemed equally elated. His left-hand companion, the graver of the two, kept gazing up at the kilns with a spirited exhilaration lightening his face. The other man was as usual almost laughing and singing, hysterical with some strange delight of his own. And behind these two Flower caught sight of Chalmers. Chalmers was bending down and struggling with the hose. It was difficult to distinguish his face, but Flower was comforted by the sight of the faded mackintosh. He was glad that Chalmers was with him. He would never feel insecure as long as Chalmers wandered somewhere in the background. There in the fired basin, with the kilns towering above him, surrounded by the grotesque menagerie of iron machines, he recognized that the nightmare was in some way acceptable only through his relationship with Chalmers. This was a place of madness and mystery, of shock and fierce paradox, of weird abstraction and surreal romance. Life as he had known it had been broken down. From the elements a new world had been moulded. Iron, fire, brick, smoke, and water from the huge hydrants were patterned into a new choreography that enlivened fiercely the blood and the spirit. And deeply Flower knew that the revolution would not have been possible without Chalmers there.

Another hoselength was being lowered. Alongside it the first of Flower's companions climbed down the ladder. As he reached the bottom rung he grasped the swinging coupling,

jumped to the ground, snapped it tight into the socket of the other hose. Flower was free now to run forward! His companion would follow! Flower strained his eyes into the smoke that hurried and twisted all around him. To the right of the nearest kiln he saw a gap in the fire. He ran towards it. Isolated in a declivity pooled with water stood a machine. It was an iron structure some twenty feet high, shaped something like a giant cockerel. Flower began to climb it. Slowly he explored his way, grasping a stanchion here, searching there for a foothold on some unseen strut. Once he grasped hold of a pipe that must recently have been exposed to an intense heat. Quietly it blistered his hand. He nearly dropped as the pain seared through him. But with his boots and his clinging body he altered his position and searched further upwards. He reached the summit and sat astride the cockerel's head. Opposite him blazed a wide fissure in the wall. Through this he could smash his water into the belly of the flaming kiln. He lowered the rope he was carrying. Down below his companions and Chalmers had already laid out the hose. Now they secured it to the rope and soon all three were clambering towards him up the sides of the giant iron bird.

The heat was fierce. Already the sweat was swimming round Flower's eyes. There was little smoke, but the heat caught at his throat. He gripped his iron saddle tighter as he strained to pull up the hose. He felt the sweat drenching him. His face had long been blackened: his tunic was drenched and muddied: his bright axe was caked with grit and char: his hands were bruised and torn by the heavy couplings and the whiplash hose: yet he scarcely noticed these things, for in the urgency of the moment a greater sensuality of the spirit had subordinated the sensory flesh. He waved down to his companions. Soon their heads appeared by his boots. Then they were jostling for secure positions around the cockerel's head. There was space enough. Each man got ready to push against the heavy pressure that would force the hose back when the water came. They were settled and Flower signalled down for water.

Through the maze of mobile plumbing the water came writhing towards Flower on the cockerel's head. Through breechings, couplings, and great metal adaptors the water sped. Then the hose beneath them swelled and with the

crack of a rifle shot it tapered suddenly out before them in a frothed white pole. For a few seconds it spluttered and cracked. Then the jet gathered itself rigid, the water pressure increased, the hose recoiled like the rearing head of a snake, the men's muscles tightened, and a great watery feather at the end of the pole smashed its way through the opening of the kiln into the redness beyond. All around lay a wild sea of fire. The cockerel swayed gently. High above hung the hooks, the chains, the heavy pulleys. In front towered the enormous kiln. To either side the weird shapes of the machines lurked back in the smoke and fireglow. Derricks clung to the walls like sleeping bats. Firemen clambered high above on the iron balconies. Flower gritted his teeth in triumph. "This is it!" he thought—"This is what I have been waiting for! Here the world is broken down and reassembled. At last I have come face to face with the essence of things! Here is the abstract! Here is a brave new romance! Here is the violent, quintessential magma for which the spirit has thirsted! Here is reason!"

A new sound perforated the fierce soughing of the fire. A rattling sound, but deep, like a gust of cannon fire. Flower glanced over his shoulder at the wall behind him. It was curving inwards. It was crumpling like paper—the high solid wall! For a limitless second it hesitated . . . then it sank down, bending and folding with a fearful composure. The huge mass of brick sank in folds, rustling neatly onto itself like a silken skirt. A few stray bricks came flying towards the cockerel. In the great noise the roof seemed for a moment to rock. Then the building regained its stability, and only a high cloud of white mortar-dust hung in the air to mark the episode.

Flower was still gazing fascinated at this white cloud when suddenly he noticed that a bright light was shining through it, a white light that transcended even the furnace glow from the kilns.

The mist dissolved. The rubble of brick still smoked slowly, but over this, high on his saddle on top of the cockerel's head, Flower commanded a wide view into the room beyond. His hands still clenched tight the metal nozzle, but he had ceased to care for the direction of the jet, which now feathered aimlessly here and there over the forgotten basin. What Flower saw in the new room transfixed him absolutely. His

previous exhilaration faded beneath a sensation of profound and calm joy, so intense a joy that in its root he perceived sadness. Perhaps this was because suddenly all his personal anxieties had receded, and in their recession he felt abandoned by those familiar interests—but nevertheless he surrendered now willingly to his new, more infinite yearning.

The room burnt with white and bright yellow light. Its lofty architecture was coated miraculously with a fine white powder. Flour. The floor was littered with burst sacks of flour. Other sacks were packed tight up to the ceiling. From these the flour had poured and now it lay silted in beautiful deep drifts that flowed gracefully down to the floor. Flour piled itself in soft cones up the white-coated pillars. Along a powdered conveyor belt crept three stooping figures whitely muffled in asbestos suits. Their square goggled heads peered anxiously down over the other side of the huge belt. Somewhere beneath burned a fire of yellow flames. It threw up a pale, cold, yet a fierce radiance, the halo of a gasflare. The asbestos automata struggled slowly with their hose. They weaved like divers weighed down beneath a great depth of water. Behind them, through a tall fissure in the furthest wall, flowed a glacier of brilliant tallow. Like milky lava it had spread down from ceiling height, fanning majestically to either side and far out across the floor. Now it had set in a sheer wall of oiled ice, lucently marvellous, smooth, polished, yet intimidating from within that it would be soft and wet to touch. The high white walls, the white-crusted girders, the duning and the silting of those soft flourbeds, and now finally the flow of the great pellucid glacier merged into a harmony of massed shape and tactile wonder that radiated some limitless composure of beauty unaffected by dramas and associations, pure.

Wishing to share his elation with others, Flower glanced down to see what his companions and his old friend were doing. They still clung to the iron cockerel. His companions had thrust their heads above the metal balustrade, and now resting their chins on their hands, they peered like little dogs across the whitelit room. The grave face of the left-hand man reflected a certain distrust. Seduced, his eyes nevertheless seemed to hold themselves distant with suspicion. He might have suspected that such beauty was insufficient, that possibly its appeal was deceptively sensual, that on its

way from the senses to the spirit it had skipped the precious intellect. He might have been frightened because this harmony before him denied analysis. He might have hated feeling at a loss for reasons. Nevertheless it was plain that he could only avert his eyes from the scene with difficulty.

But as to the right-hand companion, this was different. His eyes and his mouth were smiling frankly with pleasure. The appeal must have gone straight to his heart. He was drinking it, loving it. Yet suddenly, still smiling, throwing the scene a last look of hesitating delight, he bent down and started bracing up the buttons that secured his axe to his belt. Flower was amazed: "I should not have thought it," he whispered. "This is a most surprising fellow. He turns out to be like the man who, having obtained a beautiful mistress, intends with all his soul to reserve every moment of the day for her devotion, but in fact, knowing that she lies waiting upstairs, puts every other matter and business before those moments, thinking that after this has been settled and that adjusted he will be free to open the door to her room. This man never meets his mistress again."

Chalmers, wedged in his faded mackintosh between a piston casing and one of the bird's arrogant iron legs, winked up at Flower. The wink was confidential and the smile and the nod that followed seemed to confirm some great understanding between them. Flower caught his breath suddenly. It was as though his old friend were suggesting that a mutual nostalgia played a part in their enjoyment of the new revelation. Flower frowned hard, bending his eyes close together to read further into Chalmers' elusive face. Somehow Chalmers was a bit of a mist. Flower could never quite assemble his features clearly. But now he saw Chalmers look into the white fire again. Over his old friend's face there crept a look of incredulity! Chalmers, who had winked, was astonished! The message of mutual understanding had been false! Chalmers was alien to the flour and the tallow, the pure beauty! Flower felt suddenly free. And then, following a second's impulse, he looked back over his shoulder.

Just before Flower glanced back he was thinking, in his sudden access to freedom: "My old friend isn't necessary. I did not realize that I wanted to be rid of him. But I am glad. I am also free from all the false exhilarations. What I see now I recognize in my spirit as the ultimate and most

lovely harmony. This is ecstasy. True, the startling sensation of the kilns and the iron monsters was in a sense ecstatic. There seemed to be a divine mystery in their chaos, even in their menace. But it was the mystery of madness, of primeval, lunar, demonic things. Its movement was sharp and destructive. But here, here is a fluid movement. Here the harmony soothes, yet elates. Here is a limitless spiritual ideal . . . here must be the real kernel of the fire, where joy and melancholy become one sensation, where one can trace the web of this great fire to the finely balanced pattern at its very centre."

But just as he was thinking this, Flower glanced over his shoulder. Instantly his mood changed. Again the old doubts came flying back, shattering all his decision. The room and the kilns had altered. Something had regulated the chaos. The iron machines had disappeared, melted apparently in a vast fire which now flooded the whole basin. Only the kilns remained, silhouetted still darkly against a great arch of red fire, fire that was now a sheet of fire, without flames, glowing, perpetual, a wall of awful purification. Flower's jet hit at a high nest of pipes. The pipes had burst. Now, as the water struck them, a low sonorous note began to quiver from their rounded iron bellies. The note grew, resounding and filling the air like the low, magnificent chord of an organ. Flower jammed his hose between two iron stanchions. Wildly he began to climb down the cockerel. He had forgotten his companions, he had forgotten his old friend. His boots slid and clambered for position, his hands searched madly for support as he urged himself further down. Sweating, in his great hurry, with the immense room whirling darkly in the corners of his eyes, his spirit shouted to him: "So even the glacier was not sufficient! Even that was limited! How can I recognize what I want in all this confusion? And now here I am in what seems a cathedral of fire. This too will seduce me. All these matters are near enough to truth—but, I am not sure, I am not sure. Let me get out!"—he began to shout aloud his thoughts—"Let me climb higher! This is not enough. Let me climb higher!"

Now he had jumped to the ground. Now he was running back through the burning debris, skirting the fiercer patches, jumping over jagged stone obstacles, tearing his coat on an

iron rod that grasped out for him. The huge pipes vibrated their enormous warlike chord. Now he was clambering up the iron ladder. His hands blistered on the hot metal. He never felt it. He swung himself onto the brick causeway again. Not one thought for his companions, nor for his old friend! He raced out through the steel doors and plunged into a dark gap in the wall where the staircase led further up.

The dark spiral stone echoed his flying footsteps. Round and up he ran, faster and faster, like a dreamer escaping from his nightmare, the steps falling away beneath his boots as if they themselves flowed downward to speed this wild and urgent flight. He was still running when the cool night air washed against his face. He ran right out onto the centre of a flat roof. He looked round him. It was the top. There was nothing higher. Above him he saw only the stars.

He looked to either side and saw beneath the roofs of other houses. They clustered right up to the great warehouse, out in every direction they lay as far as the eyes could see—grey roofs sleeping in the moonlight. So the warehouse had not stood alone, as he had first thought! Somewhere far away a goods train shunted, gracing the night air with the glassy music of its buffers.

Flower looked down at the dark slate roof. At his feet lay a burnt out rocket: and beside it a small black hole that the rocket had once burnt in the roof. As he picked it up—the random, reasonless rocket—Flower conceived a great love for its charred cardboard, then for a nondescript chimney that he saw at the same time from the corner of his eye, for the cold touch of his drenched sleeve on his wrist. . . .

He glanced back at the place where the staircase debouched from a cabin on to the roof. Dimly in the shadow of the doorway stood his two companions and his old friend. Flower nodded a greeting. He smiled, his awareness of all things warming him: "Yes, they will always be there. They too are part of it."

Then he turned towards the numberless roofs that stretched far away into the distance, and with a great quiet love he let himself grow aware of them, of the sleeping chimneys that told of armchairs beneath, of windvanes that knew all weathers, of curved cherubs upon the mansards of palaces, of low leaking roofs where the garret washing still dripped, of the gardens and the postmarked streets sunk in the dark

between, of a sewing machine in a lighted window, of the love behind closed shutters, of the misery that lay on silken pillows by a crystal telephone, of the ecstasy that sang on the foodstained basement couch—or of the joy that thrashed the silken pillow and the misery drawing bare the threads of the couch—of distant beauties and the comfortably ugly, of all human affairs by different standards good and bad—so that he loved a single rusted nail as he loved the Giaconda smile, the factory's timeclock as he loved the mould of autumn leaves, a mausoleum as he loved the crèche, a cat's head in the gutter as he loved the breasts of Joan.

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